CHIRON RISING

45

$8.00

ADULTS ONLY

THE ZONES SPECIAL ISSUE

THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THOSE MATURE MEN AND THEIR MALE ADMIRERS WHO SEEK ENTERTAINMENT WHICH DIGNIFIES SOCIAL, SPIRITUAL AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ADULT MALES. IF YOU ARE UNDER 21 YEARS OF AGE OR OFFENDED BY SUCH MATERIAL, PLEASE READ NO FURTHER.

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THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO

KENT AND THE COLONEL

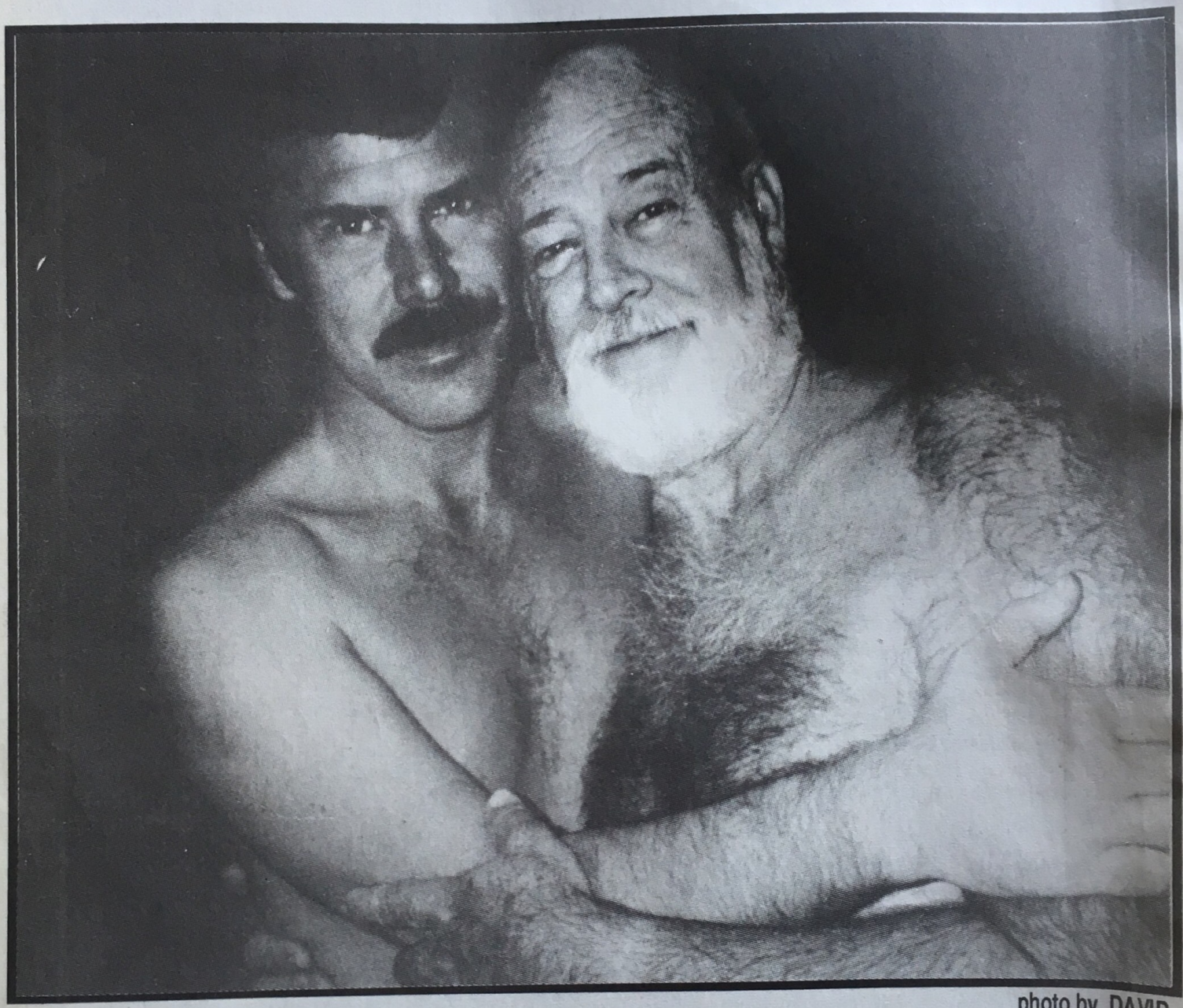


photo by DAVID

He reaches for me absently,
Knowing that I'm there,
Believing with all his heart
That I will be through time.

He knows, as do I, that
We are among the lucky ones,
For we have each made the other's life
Extraordinarily worth living.

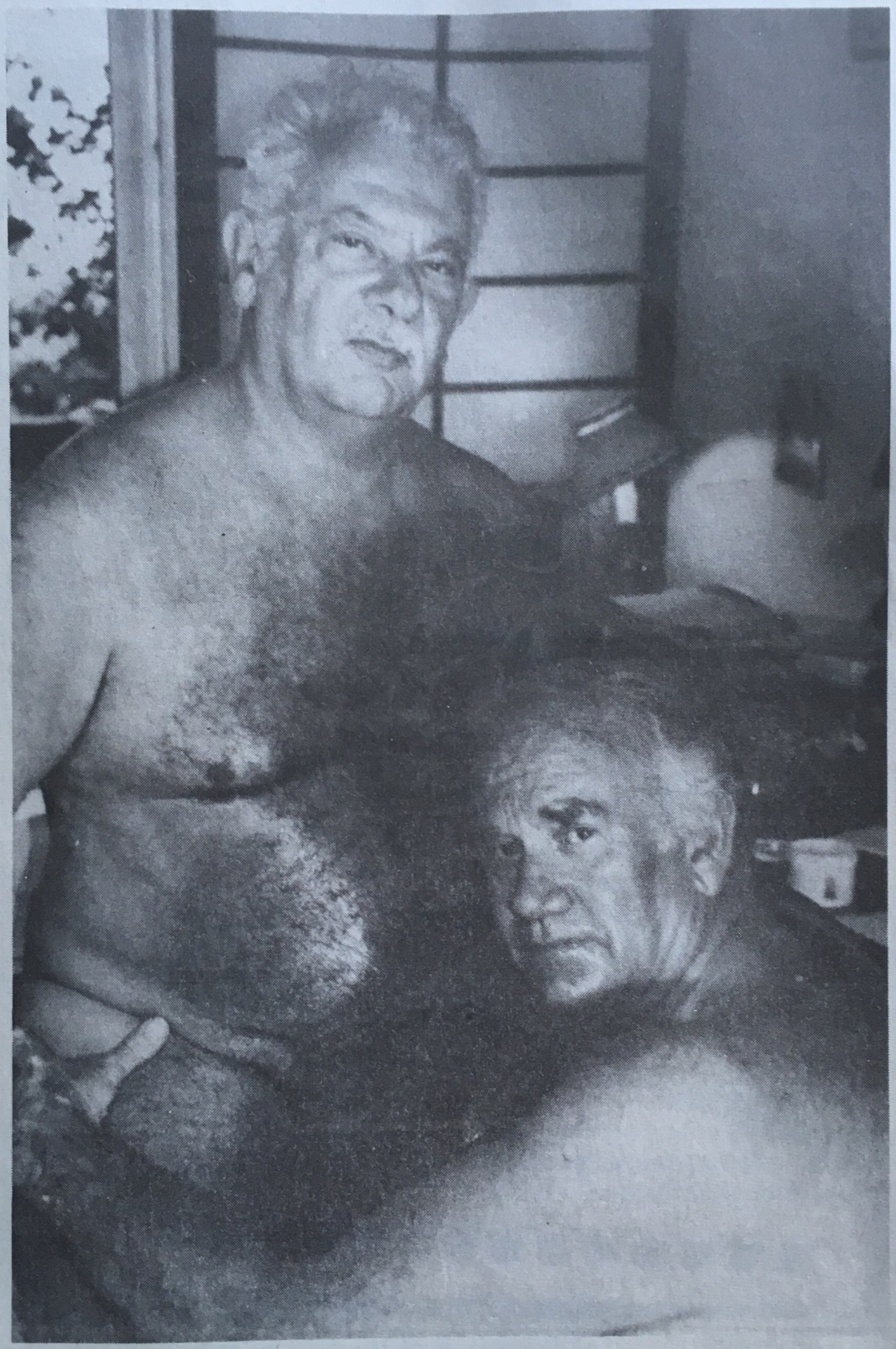
Anoynymous

No words can express the gratitude we feel for what these two men of substance have done for this magazine. We will therefore not make the attempt, except to merely say that the story of their love will be discussed and marveled over for generations to come. The residue of their love will leave a perpetual glow in the hearts of the thousands of men lucky enough to have met them.

HARRY

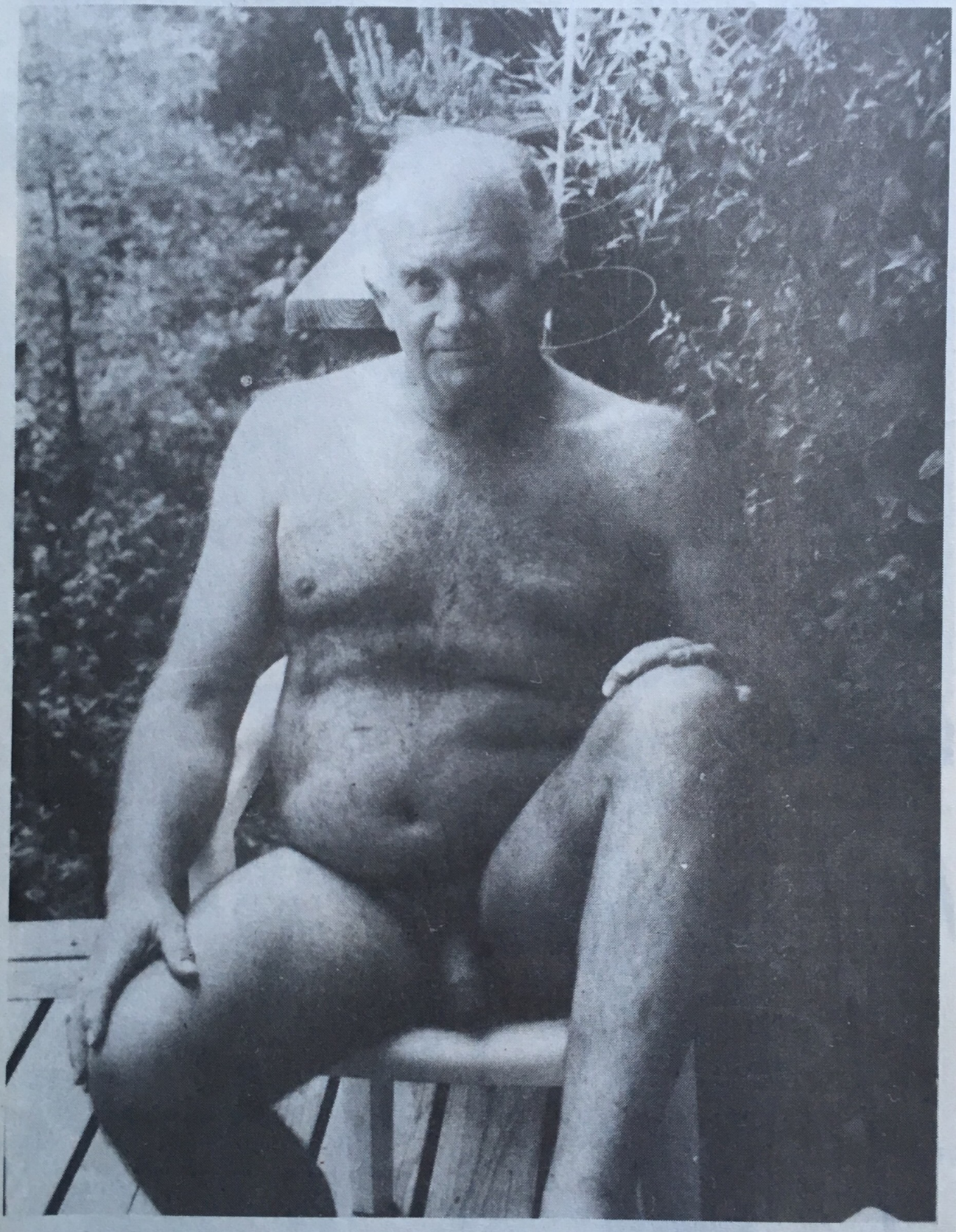
photo by JOE

This photo was published awhile back, but we decided to resurrect it to show you who takes those breathtaking photos of JOE. HARRY, 61, is the other half of that dynamic duo known and respected throughout the South, and joins JOE in restoring old homes and collecting antiques.

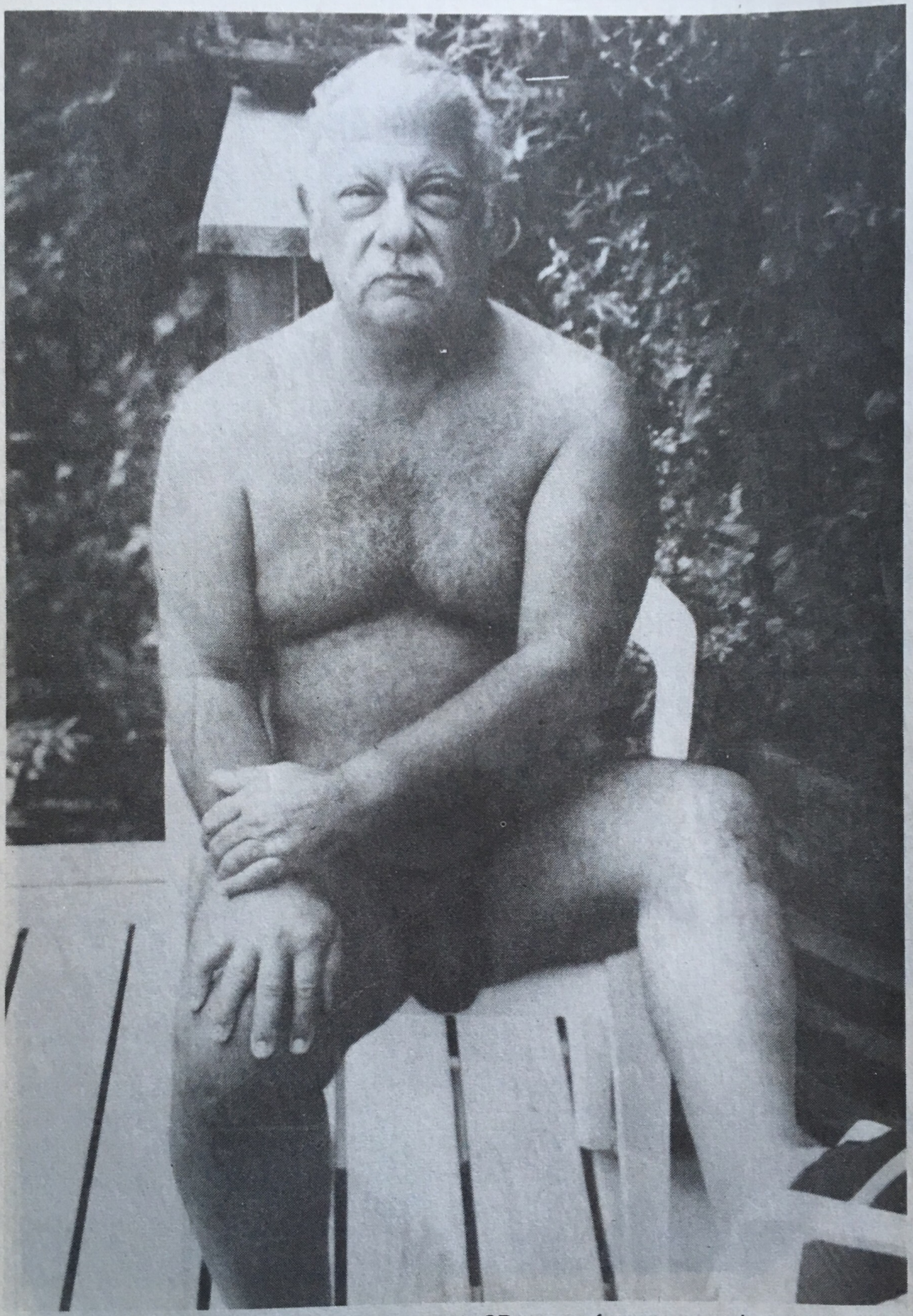


PAPA BEAR AND ZIPPER

ALL PHOTOS BY P.R. SIMON PRODUCTIONS



ZIPPER just keeps on receiving fan mail from all over the world. This very popular model and video star lives in the Palm Springs area with his life partner, CR model and fellow video star, NIPPER.



PAPA BEAR likewise gets tons of mail, having appeared in CR as one of our more popular models. Co-starring in P.R. Simon's DADDY FOR DESSERT with ZIPPER, his popularity has now gone through the roof. And as is so much the case, all this exposure has landed him a young companion--just what he's been hoping for. Sorry, PAPA BEAR is no longer available.

RUSSIAN BEAR

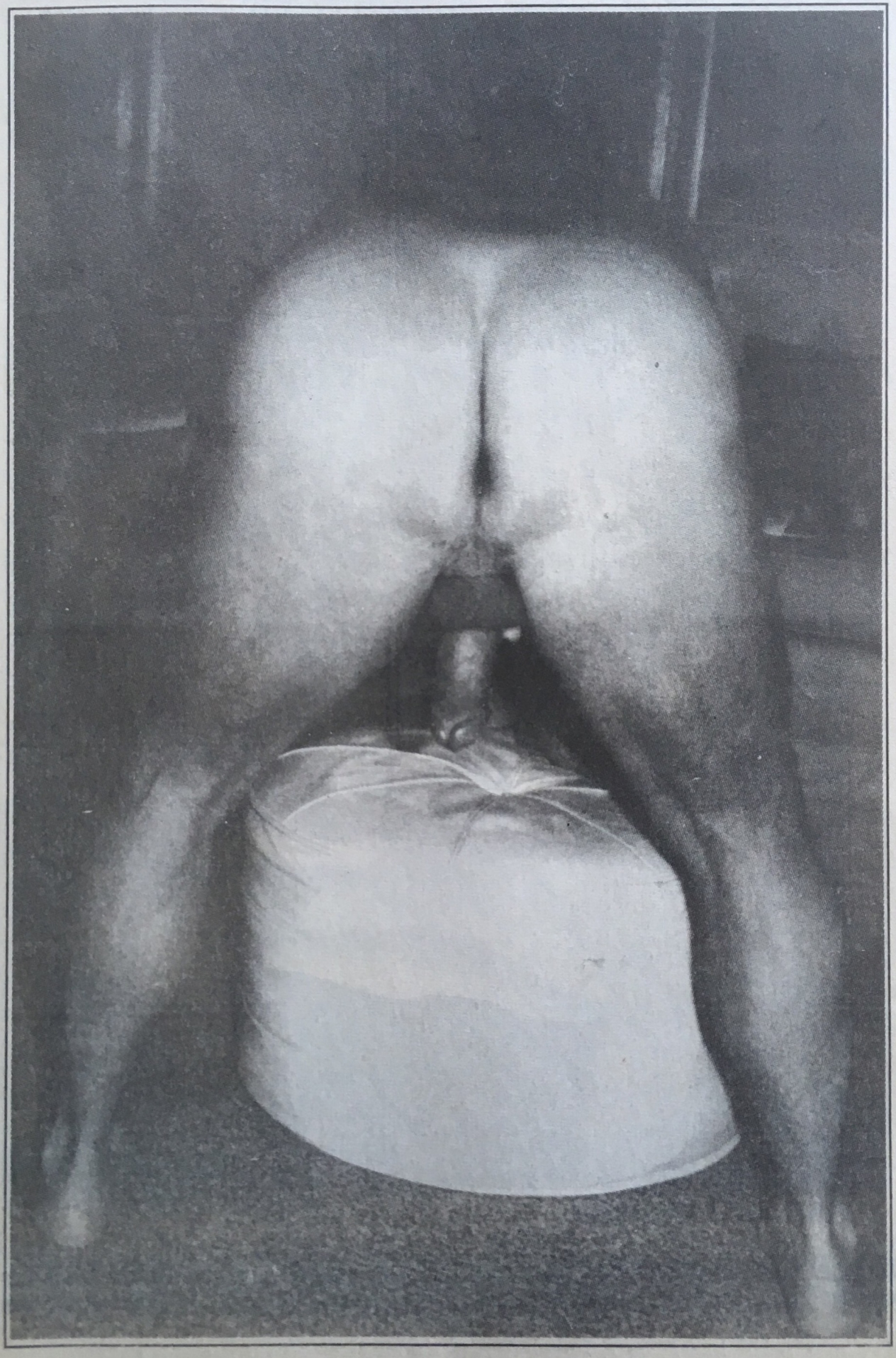
A SELF PORTRAIT

Boy, do we have the bears in this issue! RUSSIAN BEAR first appeared in our December 90 Issue and he's still receiving fan mail. He is 58, 5'-9", 195#, obviously hairy, single and well-hung. He's also a nonsmoker and very health conscious. He seeks BIG MEN, 35-60 who are well-hung and looking for a close relationship.

EX-LOGGER . . . FRONT

Well, looks like EX-LOGGER has gone and got himself hitched, too. You might say, then, that this is his farewell performance. Thanks, EX-LOGGER, for all the support you've given us and all those incredibly great photos you've contributed. We sincerely hope you'll be happy with that lucky guy you found.

. . . AND REAR



MICHAEL

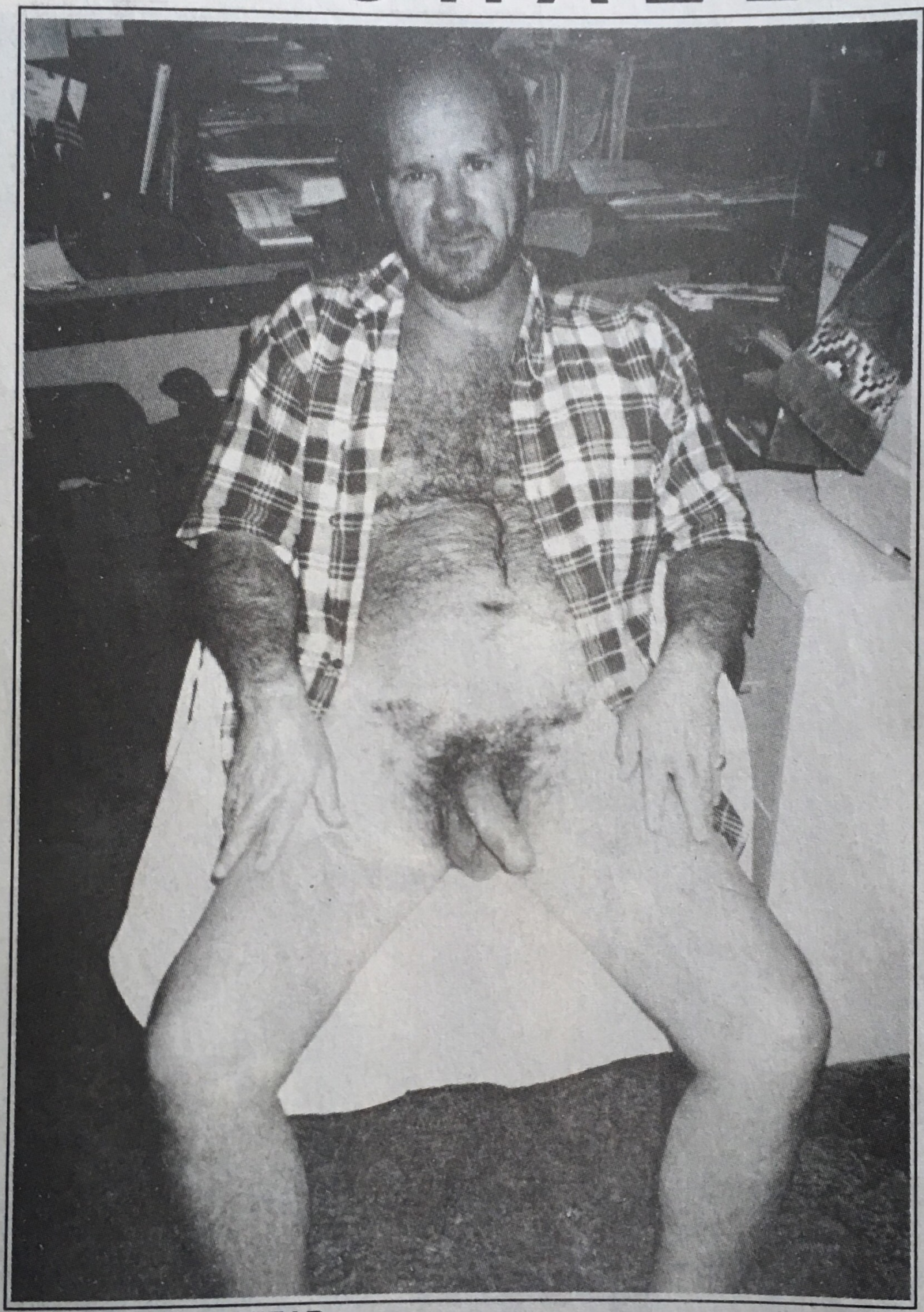


PHOTO BY PAPA BEAR

MICHAEL, another San Francisco area resident and a CR model for years, is in his late forties and travels quite a bit on business. He's therefore free to meet his fans on the road, provided they are over 50.

THOM

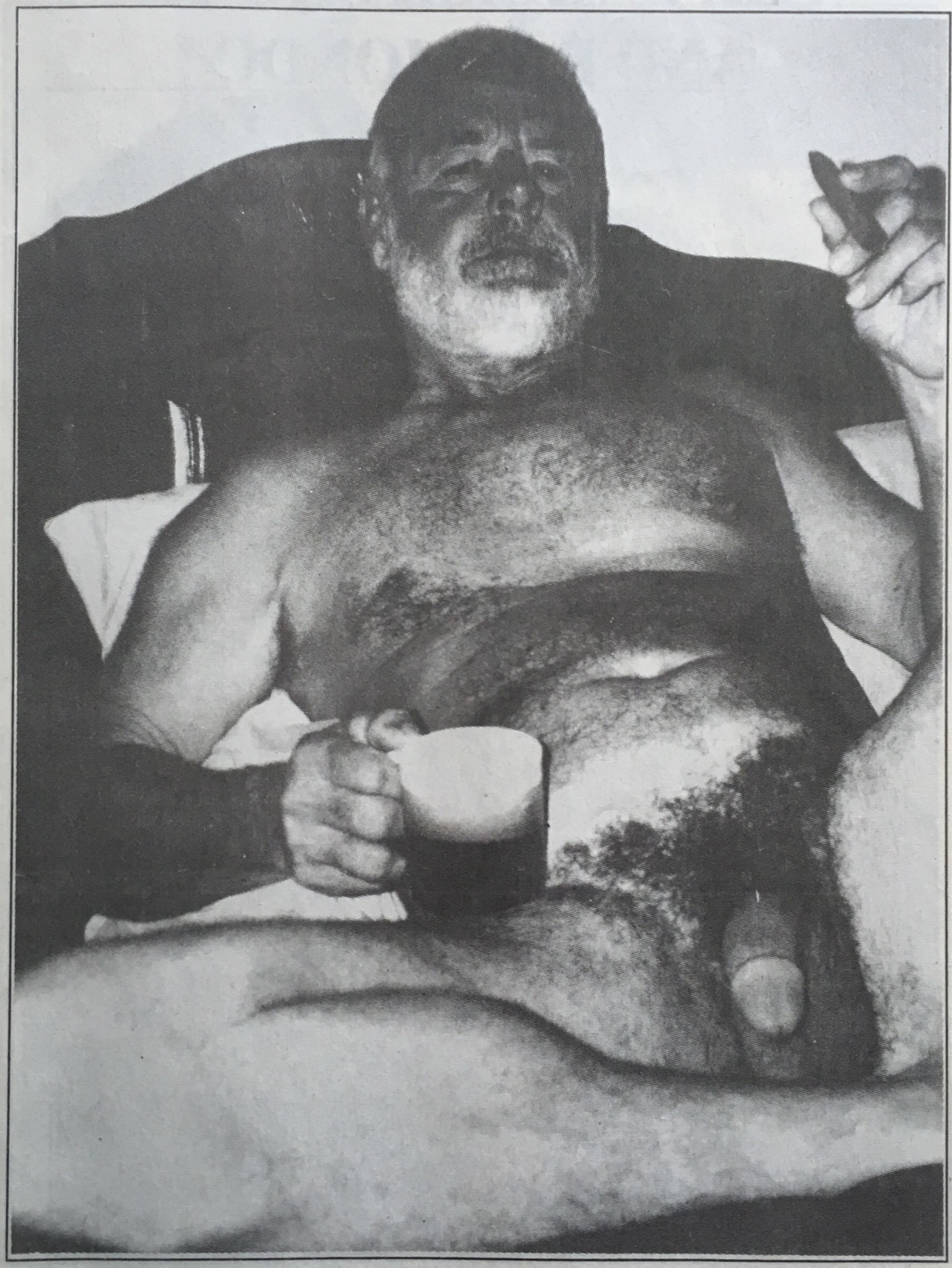


PHOTO BY KENT JUSTICE

THOM is a rugged 67-year-old outdoorsman who retired from the construction industry and now lives in the Florida panhandle. He enjoys the company of masculine, younger men like JOEL, who will soon travel to the deep south just to photograph this mature marvel.

THE ENGLISH SQUIRE AND RAYMONDO

PHOTO BY G.P.S.

This handsome couple lives on the south coast of England and are prime examples of why one should never give up looking for a mate. THE ENGLISH SQUIRE was rather inexperienced and a widower. RAYMONDO had lost his lover of several years and assumed that he'd never find another. Then, in the words of a famous sports announcer: BOOM!

THE BANKER

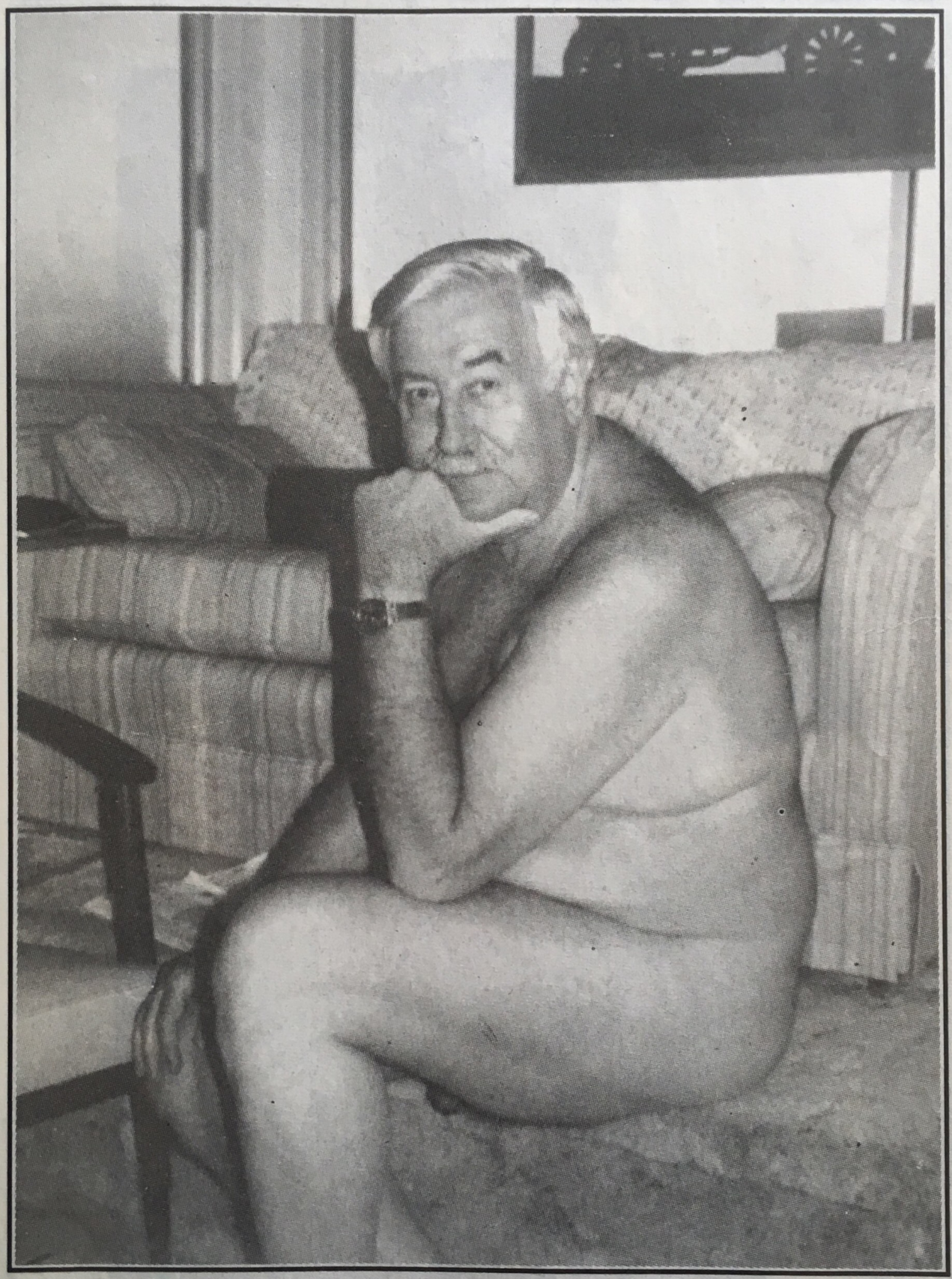
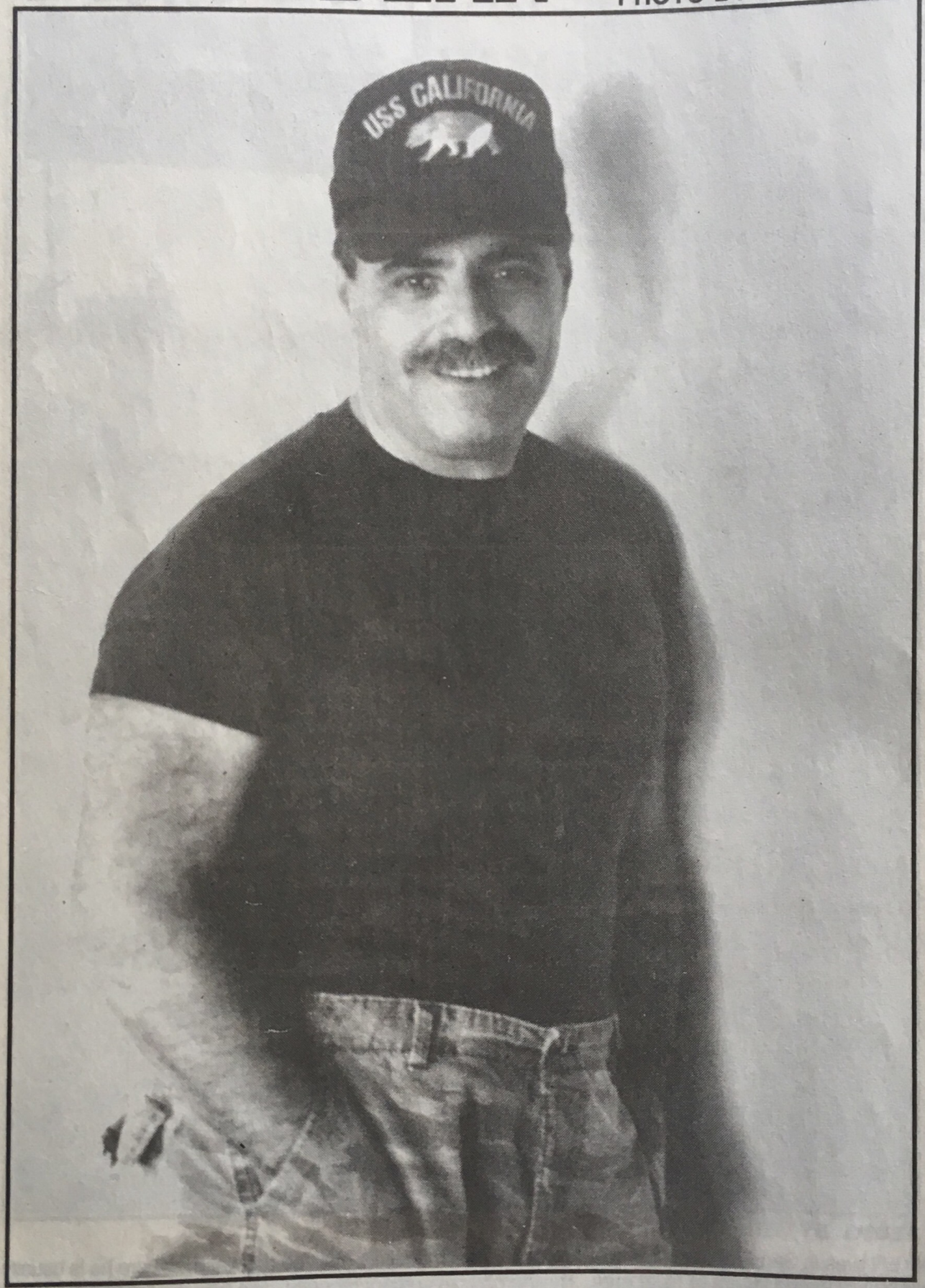


PHOTO BY THE TRAVELER

THE BANKER lives in San Francisco like so many of our best models (it must be the water), where he is usually pursued by a contingent of young lovers of older men. Having had hip surgery recently, he's now mending, but watch out, San Francisco. He's healing well and anxious to meet with his fans to take up where he left off. We understand that he's interested in making a video with P.R. SIMON. Anyone want to co-star?

JOHN BEAR

PHOTO BY RICK JONES



JOHN BEAR is a 53-year-old Italian-American who lives in (naturally)San Francisco. We've heard rumors that he might be getting serious with someone soon, but he's never told us to stop publishing his wonderful photos. I'd take that as an "available."

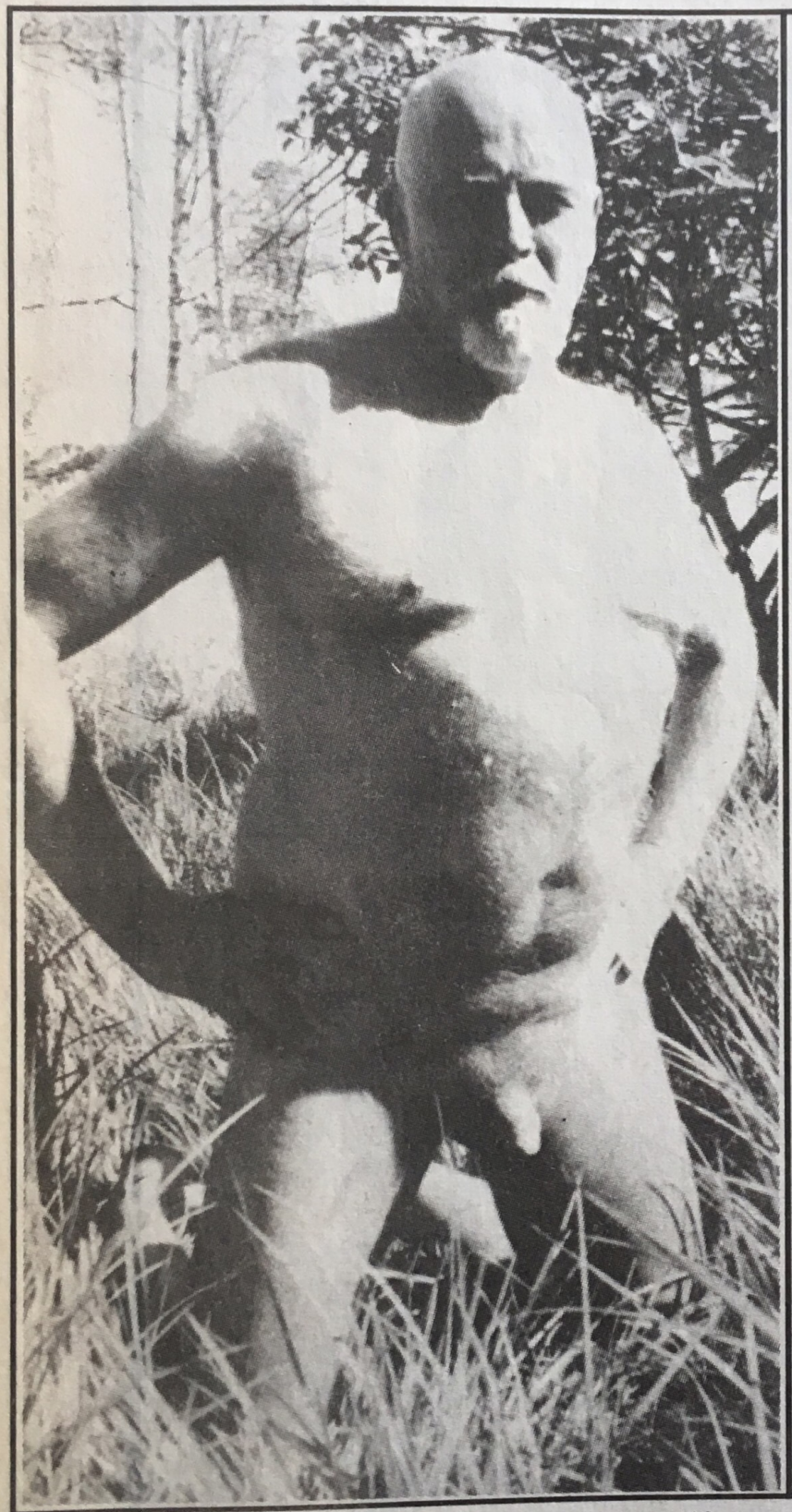
SILENUS HONEY

PHOTO BY

SOL

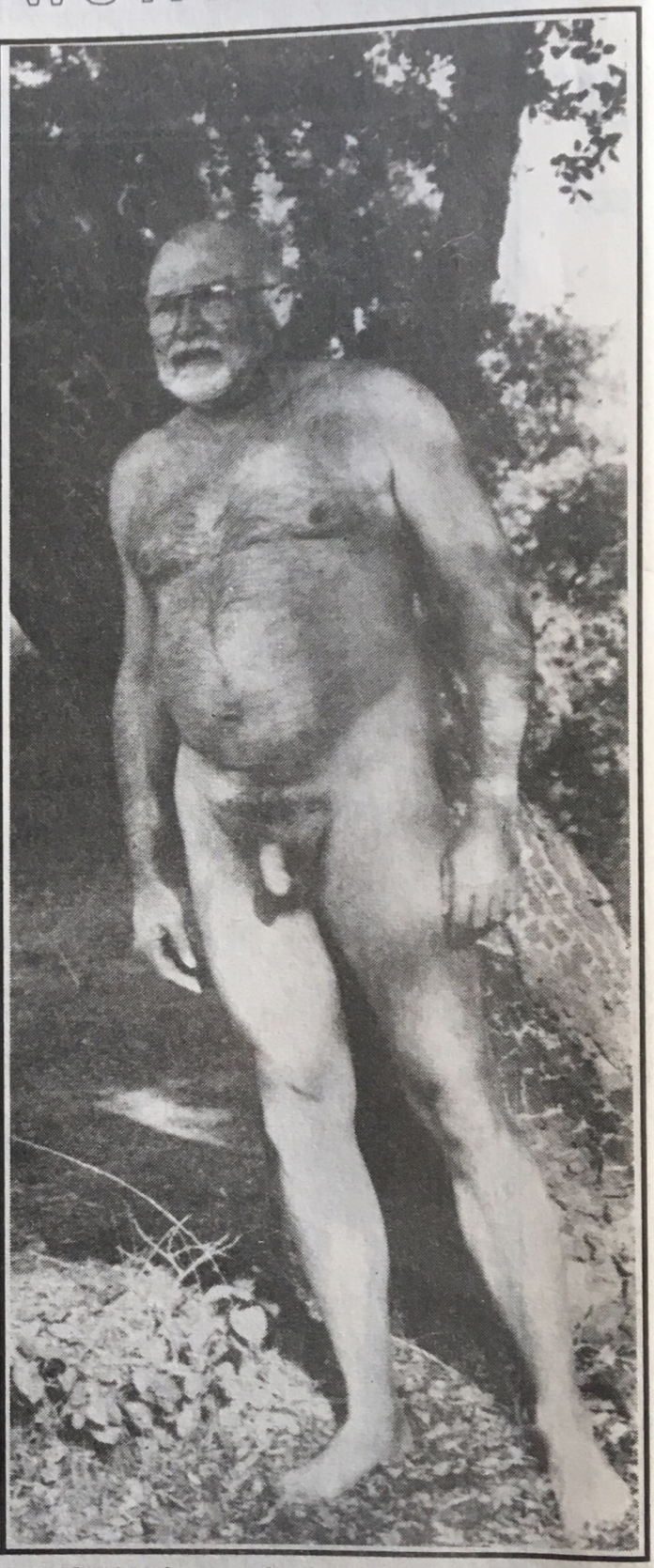
If you think he'd make one hell of a sexy Santa Claus, take a gander at our cover on the next issue (#46). He was our Santa in our December 90 issue, but had to take second billing to The Friar. Not so this time. SILENUS HONEY is a 61-year-old, 5'-10", 240# experimental filmmaker/actor. He does everything from Santa to Shakespeare and lives in Los Angeles with his 50 rare finches.

MATT . . . photo by JOEL



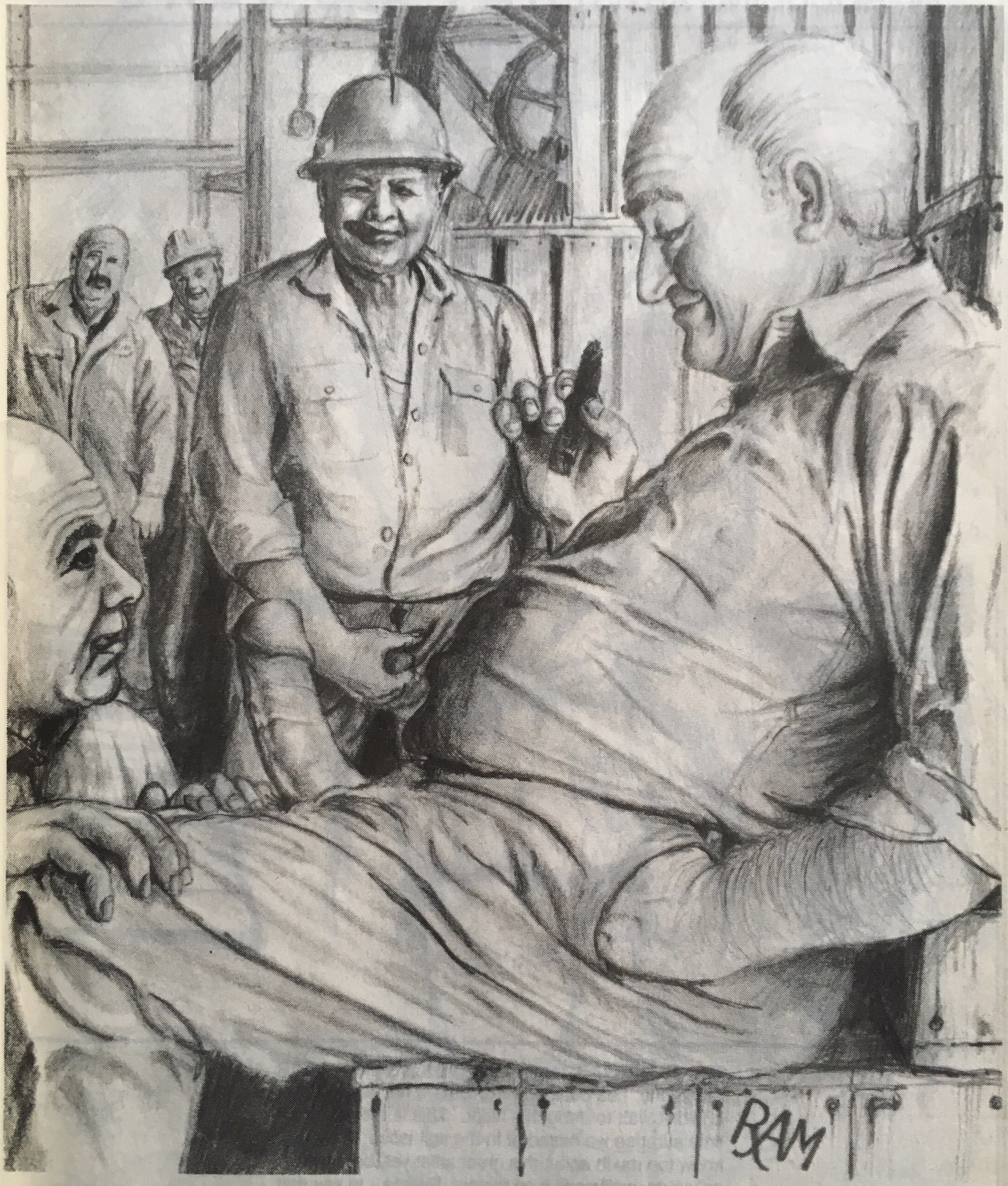
MATT resides in Colorado and lives a positive gay life with his lover. They love to visit friends throught the west and take lots of photos. MATT also lifts weights, or couldn't you tell?

WOTAN . . . a self portrait



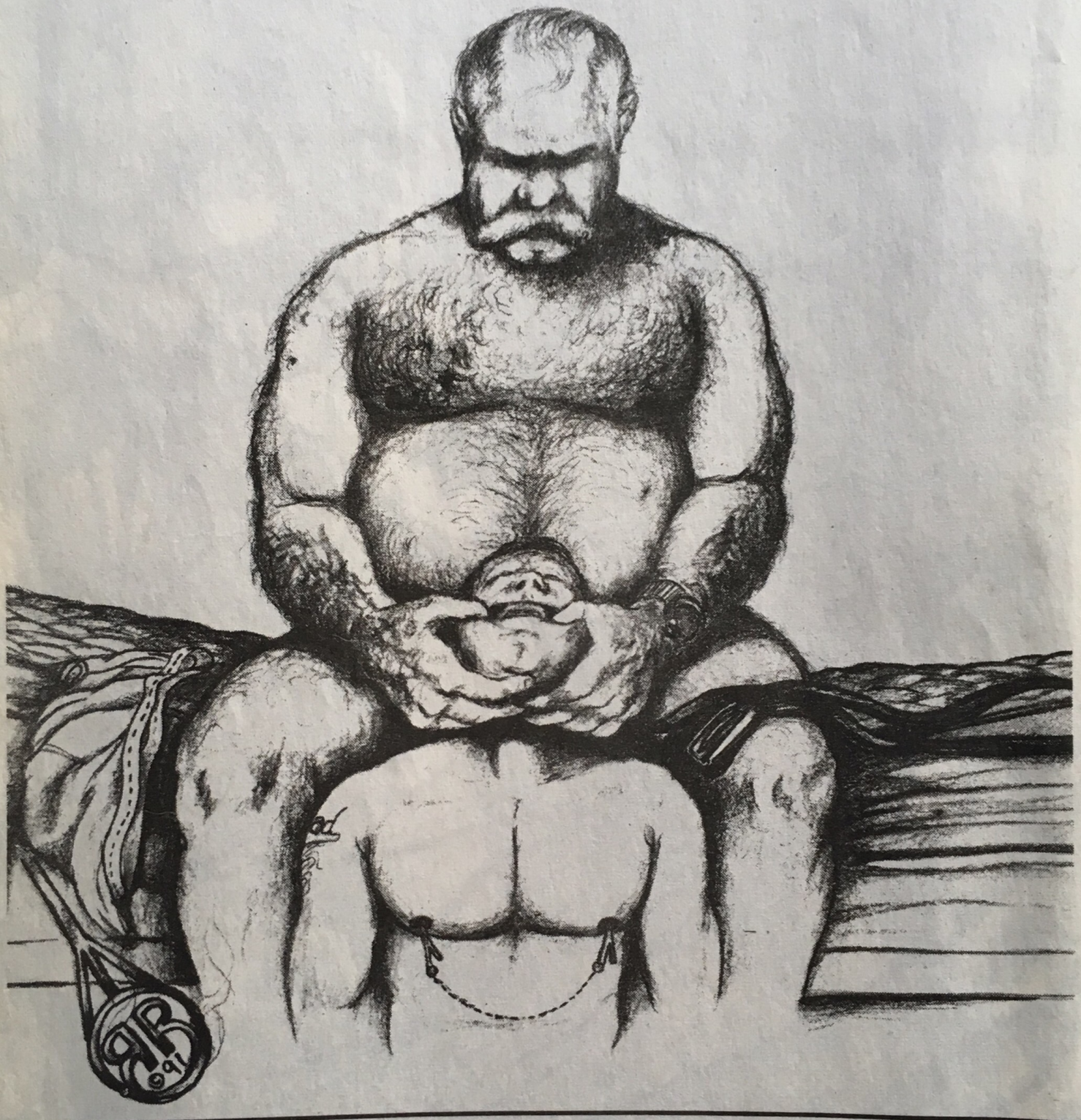
WOTAN is a professional senior into nudism and photo exchange. He likes non-drinkers, nonsmokers and hunks of all ages.

RAM REVISITED

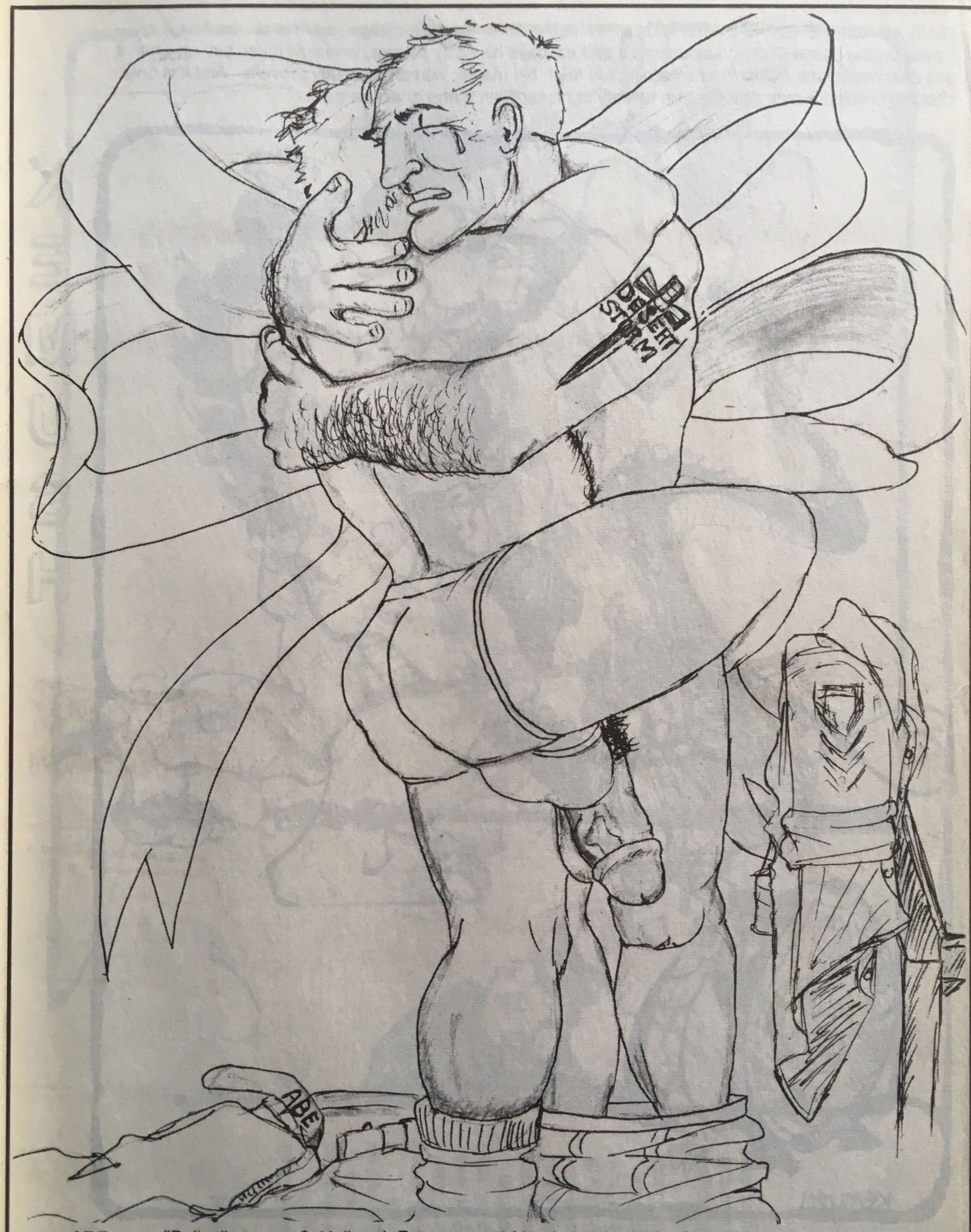


RAM has surfaced from his honeymoon with all his artistic abilities intact. He has contributed yet another masterpiece which will adorn our next issue. It will be a two pager and will knock your socks off. In the meantime, cast your eyes on this scorcher!

INTRODUCING ARTIST RAY ROMERO



RAY ROMERO, known for his great artwork in BEAR Magazine, has decided to give us a try, and we just couldn't wait to debut his work. This is therefore our little surprise we hinted at in the last issue. We don't know too much about this great artist yet, but as soon as we do, we'll pass it on to you. Suffice it to say that he's got a mean pen. We'll present more in the next issue.



ABE says, "Polically correct? Hell, no! But two good friends inspired this. I was lucky to have been a sharing partner at this very special moment. And, no, I sure as hell didn't and don't support "The War" or Mr. Bush. Call this one: WELCOME HOME, DAD

ZEUS AS ALI THE GATOR WITH A DANCING MASTER: Here we glimpse an intimate exchange of moves on the dance floor as Lucius whirls and sashays his scaly partner, who was taken pity on when it was discovered that Ali had four matching left feet! No matter; human ingenuity prevails. And it is only after the cotillion is over that the true identity of his reptilian friend is laid bare.

KEMUSH

KEMUSH is in his early sixties and has a house/soul mate of 26 years. KEMUSH and Bill avidly collect Southwest Indian art and pa sundry male nudes. KEMUSH insists that these Ovidian legends are from secret Vatican Archives and give the complete picture of Zeu Jupiter's love bouts with men--not just women--while in various shapes and forms. This is Classic Mythology Revisited!

ZEUS AS
MINOTAUR

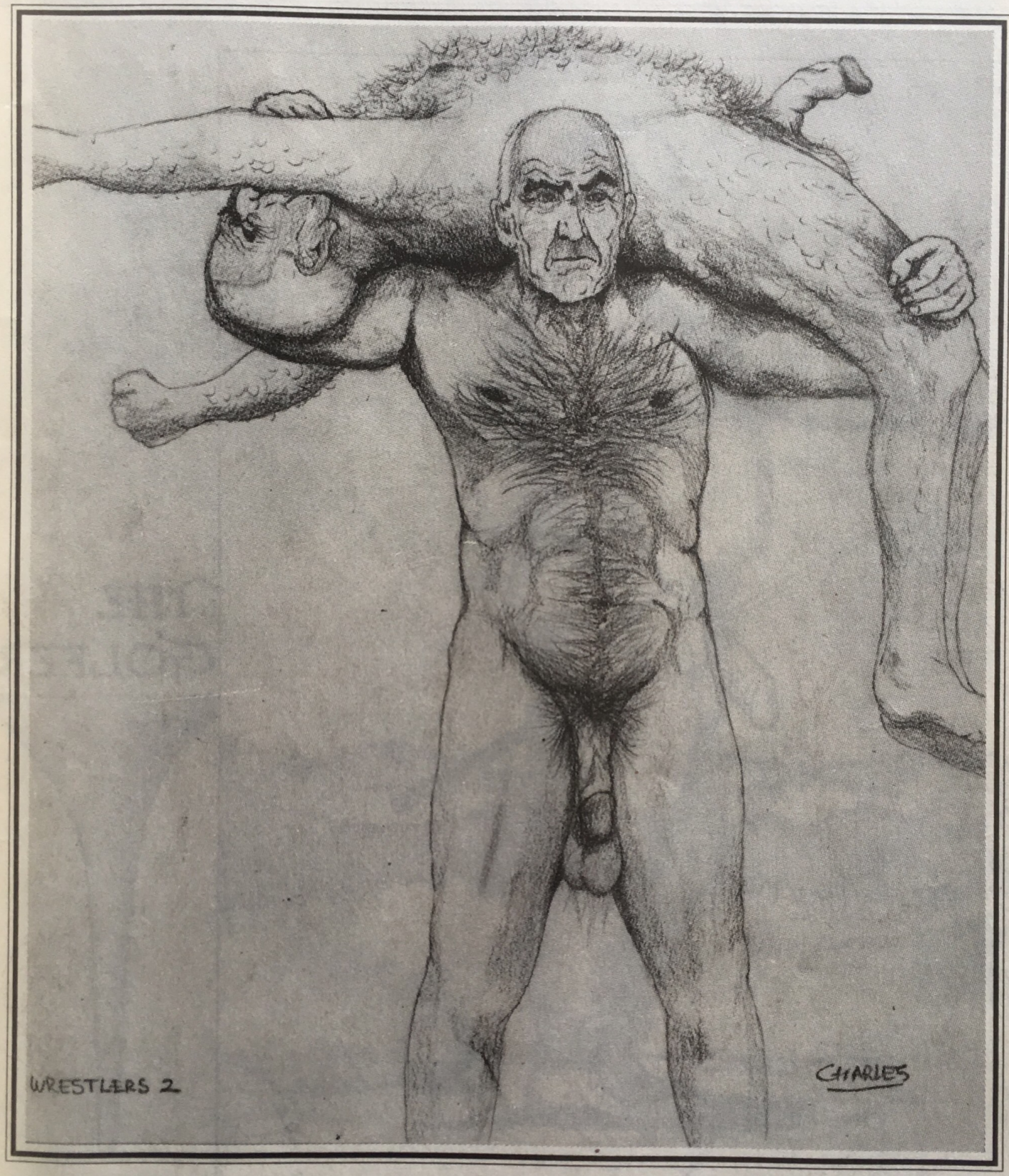
Known to us all through the Greek Myths as the creature that gobbled up men and maidens once a year in Crete. Unwritten was what was going on the other eleven months. In truth, Zeus took over the hunky body at that time, haunting the Levant country-side and spreading good will and ample legs along the way.

THE CARTOONS OF BIG EDDIE

THE TEN DOLLAR BET

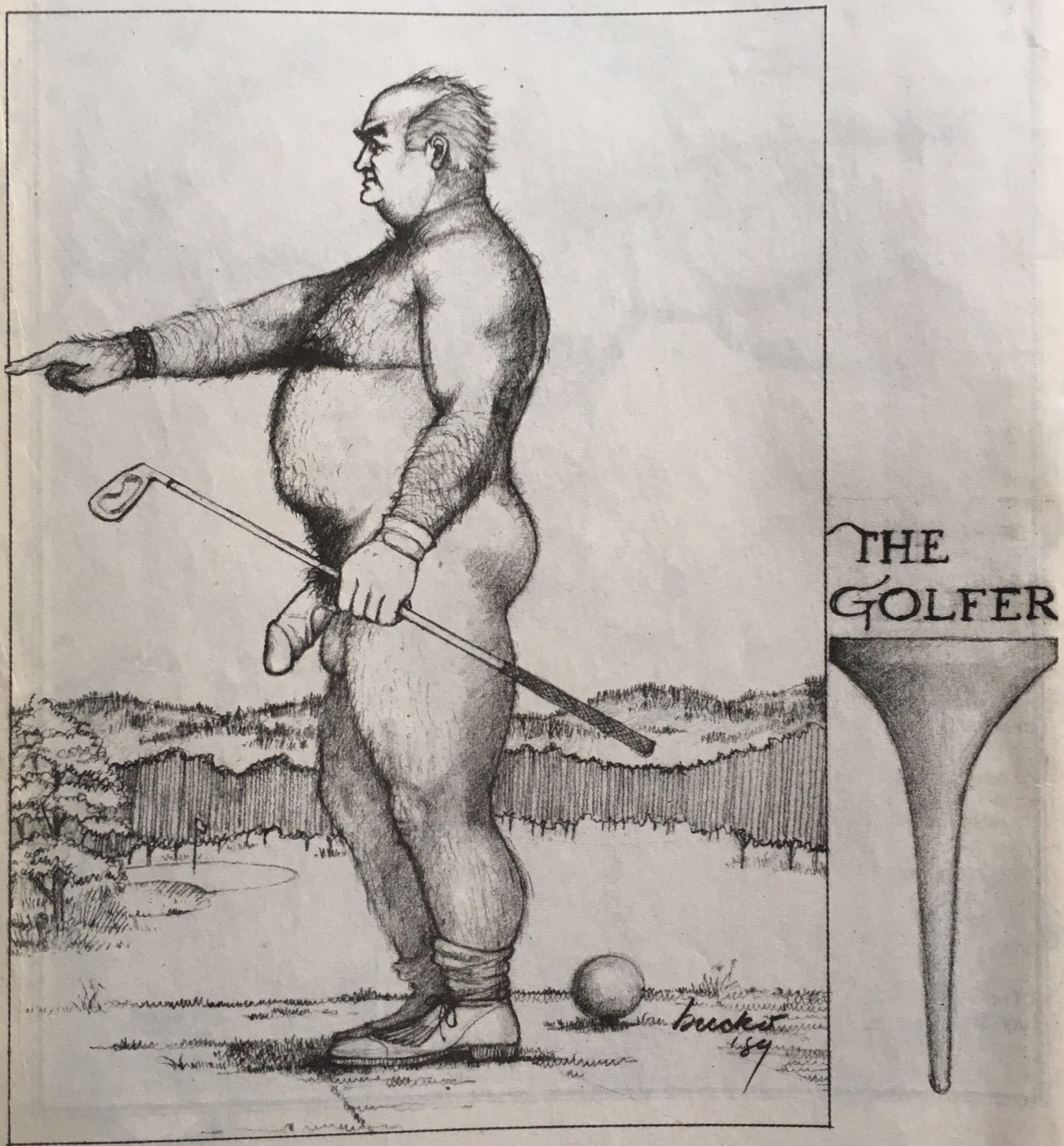
BIG EDDIE is a popular New Yorker who seems to travel constantly. He's been a rabid supporter of CR from almost day one and is one of the most generous men we've ever met. If his artwork looks familiar, you've probably seen his work extensively in the newsletter of Girth & Mirth New York, where he is a member. He's a senior and loves big senior men.

THE ARTWORK OF CHARLES OF FRANCE



CHARLES OF FRANCE is a 38-year-old Frenchman who loves to place his senior subjects in the unusual and erotic environments of S & M, bondage and nude wrestling.

THE ARTWORK OF BUCKO



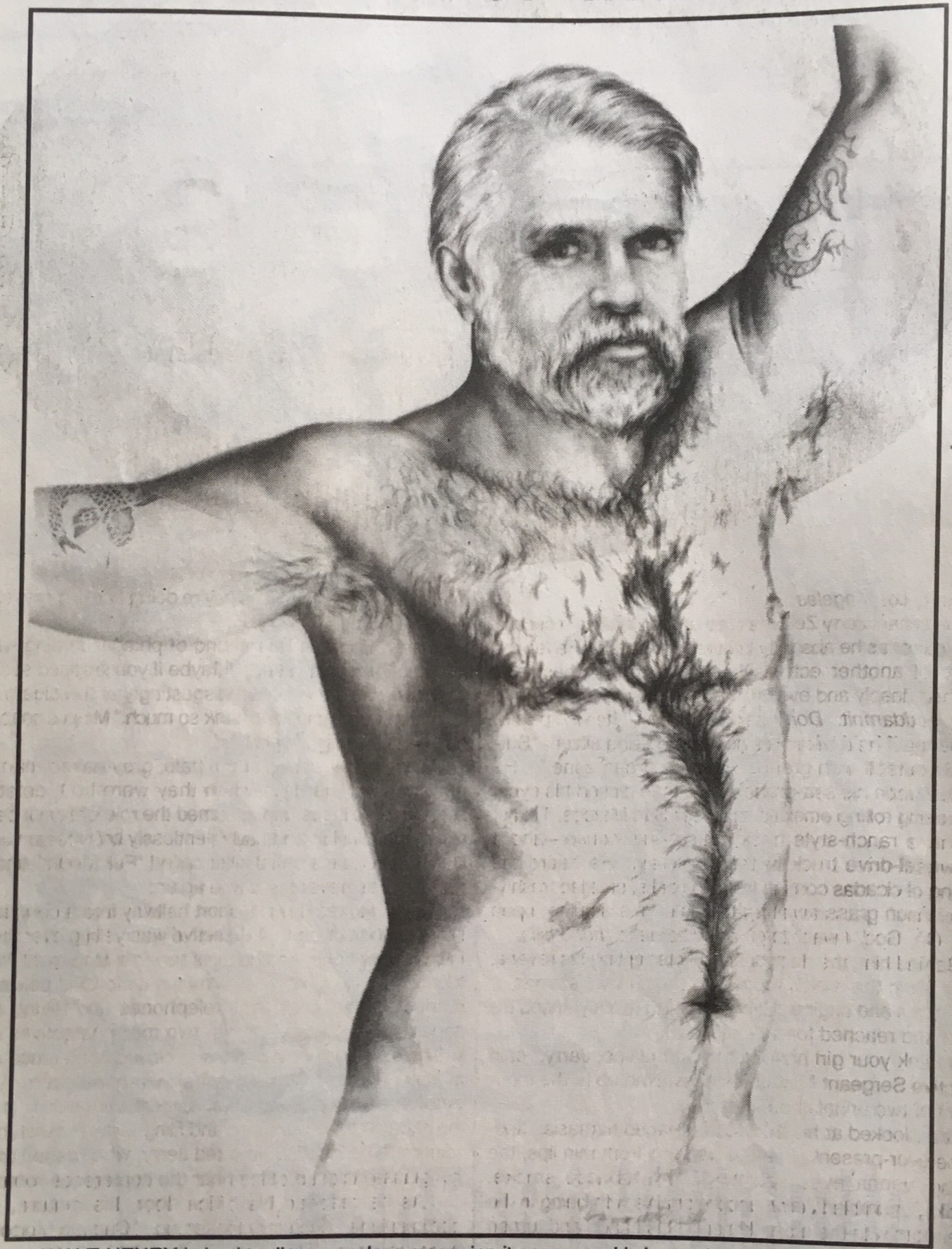
BUCKO is a stocky, hefty, 60-year-old American/Asian who lives on the Eastern Seaboard with a buddy. He's an avid sports enthusiast and great writer, too. Since this work is the last we have of his artwork, we eagerly look forward to more. How about writing him and encouraging him?

KOALA REVISITED

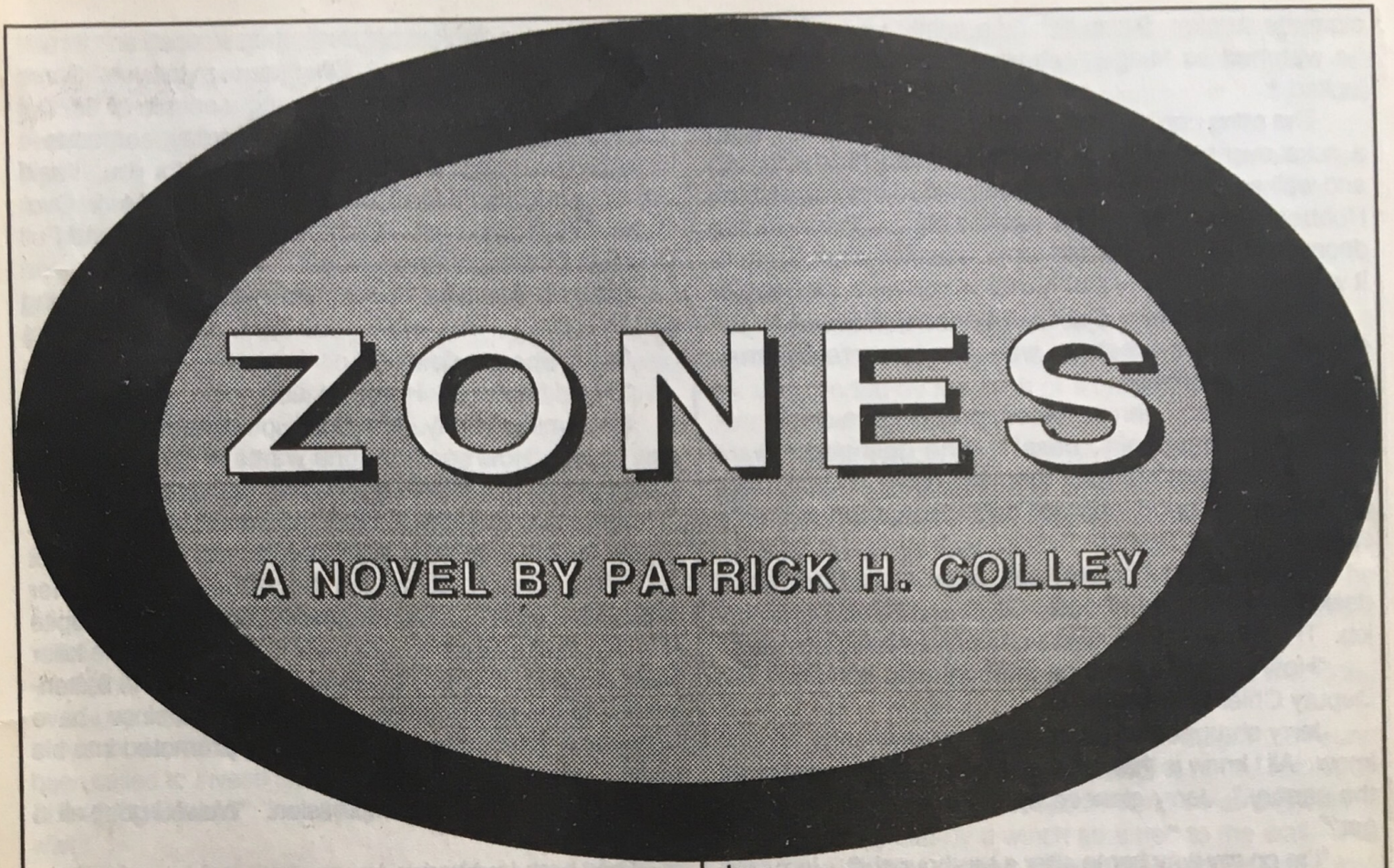
KOALA is a young, medium-weight Oriental guy living in Australia and working throughout Asia as a photojournalist. He's interested in corresponding with chubbies/chubby chasers and getting suggestions on what kind of drawings CR readers desire. This drawing was presented some time ago and, in our opinion, is one of his finest.

Koala

THE ARTWORK OF WALT HENRY



WALT HENRY is in virtually every class magazine it seems and is becoming one of the finest artists in the business. The smart word on the street is that one should acquire this man's artwork before the prices start elevating at a rapid pace. He's hot!



ONE

Summer, Los Angeles

Lieutenant Jerry Zeitler stared at his imposing reflection in the mirror as he absently lathered his hands. He felt the thump of another ectopic heartbeat in his chest and breathed deeply and evenly. *It's from your brain, not your heart, goddamnit. Don't panic.* "Green," he whispered, wondering if he'd taken his noon-time tranquilizer. "Surround yourself with green. Find the green zone." He focused upon his sea-green irises, then closed his eyes, envisioning rolling emerald hills near San Marcos, Texas. He saw a ranch-style brick house—his house—and a four-wheel-drive truck in the driveway. He heard the chirping of cicadas coming from live oaks, smelled freshly-cut Johnson grass awaiting the baler in a sloping, open field. *Oh, God, I want to go back home to those hills.*

Behind him, the door opened, interrupting his reverie, briefly filling the men's room with the chaotic sounds of loud voices and ringing telephones. He quickly rinsed his hands and reached for a paper towel.

"I think your girl has Morton on the line, Jerry," said Detective Sergeant Mingus as he walked up to the more distant of two urinals near Jerry.

Jerry looked at his thin, leather-faced nemesis, finding the ever-present cigarette hanging from thin lips, the bulging sienna eyes squinting from tobacco smoke. "Thanks," mumbled Jerry, uncomfortable with being in the same room with the man. He dried his hands and turned to leave.

"Oh, Jerry."

The lieutenant glanced at him, holding his hand on the door.

"I'll be out tomorrow. They're doing some more tests." Mingus coughed deeply.

Jerry winced at the sound of phlegm rattling within Mingus's bronchial tubes. "Maybe if you stopped sucking on those . . . ." He looked disgustingly at the cigarette.

"Maybe you shouldn't *drink* so much," Mingus snapped, his eyes flashing with hatred.

Jerry coldly stared at the pale, grey-haired man and remembered the days when they were both detective sergeants. Mingus had assumed the role of senior detective in the division and had relentlessly browbeaten Jerry. But along came a serial killer called "Full Moon," and the division was never the same again.

Jerry walked down a short hallway into a congested, smoke-filled bull pen. A detective was yelling over the din into his telephone; another was taking a statement from a frightened young woman. While a uniformed policeman rushed around answering telephones and taking messages at unoccupied desks, two more detectives were yelling at a suspect in a glass-enclosed conference room at the far end. Some clerical personnel were typing furiously on word processors. Others were noisily operating copy and fax machines and filing away huge stacks of folders. The disorder irritated Jerry, who rushed toward his glass-enclosed office near the conference room.

As he reached his office door, his mature, dark-complexioned secretary looked up. "Captain Morton just hung up, Jerry. He wants you to call him."

"Thanks, Ginger." He walked into his office and closed the door, banishing the offensive sounds and

cigarette smoke. Sitting behind a neatly organized desk, he watched as Mingus returned to his own desk and locked it.

The ailing cop glanced at Jerry and grinned. Throwing a jacket over his shoulder, he grimaced as if he was in pain and walked toward the hallway leading to the exit and the Robbery Division. As he passed through the double doorway, he almost collided with Detective Maria Santoro. It was obvious to Jerry that hostile words were exchanged.

Santoro, a black Cuban-American, stopped to exchange pleasant greetings with Jerry's secretary, then came into his office.

"Hey, Santo," Jerry greeted, pointing to a chair.

"What's happenin', boss?" She gestured toward where she'd met Mingus, then sat down. "Cockroach don't look too good. Maybe he'll croak soon and stop calling me Mike Tyson."

"Don't hold your breath," said Jerry, staring at Mingus' desk. "I'll bet his new buddy, Caiazza, promised him my job. The chance to get even's probably keeping him alive."

"How in the fuck did he get tight with someone like Deputy Chief Caiazza?"

Jerry shrugged and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I don't know. All I know is that he looks like the cat that swallowed the canary." Jerry glanced up at her. "What have you got?"

"I'm on my way home after a ten-hour shift. Jerry, we need help around here."

"You think I don't know that?" Jerry grumbled. "I've talked to Captain Morton until I'm blue in the face."

She shook her head. "I guess we just have to get used to it . . . like getting used to Mingus."

"That's life," said Jerry, smiling sarcastically.

"How long a shift have *you* worked?"

Jerry looked at his watch, which showed 7:46 pm. "Jesus, no wonder I feel so rotten. I didn't eat lunch, and my blood sugar's probably less than twenty. You got something sweet on you?"

"Uh, huh," she said, winking, "but you can't have it." She leered at Ginger. "But, God, *she* could," Santoro whispered, abruptly walking out to the secretary's desk. "Ginger, honey, he forgot to eat again." She waved and left, smiling back at Jerry's embarrassed expression.

Ginger pulled a candy bar from her desk and brought it to Jerry.

"Thanks." Jerry took the candy and hungrily tore open the wrapper. "Why are you still here?"

Ginger looked at him with concern. "I'm trying to get caught up on Finnigan's and Santoro's case notes."

"Let them type their own goddamn notes."

"It's in my job description. Why don't you go home and eat something before you go into a diabetic coma?"

"Yes, Mommy." Jerry said with his mouth full of candy. He'd "stolen" Ginger from the Robbery Division the previous week; it was by far the most productive thing he'd accomplished since taking over the Hollywood/Wilshire Homicide Division eleven months earlier.

She started back to her desk, then stopped and turned with a puzzled expression. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. Some weirdo called this morning and sang a couple of bars of 'Moon River,' then hung up. And yesterday, someone—probably the same guy—called and asked for you. I said you were out, then he sang the first few bars of 'Moon Over Miami.'" She shrugged. "Some crank caller from the Full Moon serial killer case, maybe?"

Jerry considered it. "I don't know. Did he say anything else?"

"No." She sat down.

"Could he sing?" He chuckled.

She smiled briefly. It was obvious that she liked her new boss. "How come no one wants to talk about Full Moon, Jerry? It's like everyone's afraid to talk about it."

Jerry had no desire to discuss it either, but he felt that Ginger deserved at least a brief explanation. "It took a lot out of us, Ginger. Every full moon there was another mutilated woman . . . and we never even got *close* in spite of *all kinds* of evidence. We blew it. And when the killer finally stopped, the body count was fourteen. The lieutenant before me was made the scapegoat and, since I have a degree in criminology . . . well, I got promoted into his spot . . . leaving Mingus with zilch."

She feigned a dazed expression. "Wow! I got it all in one breath."

They both laughed.

Ginger stood up but lingered. "You're all afraid Full Moon will come back, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe we are." *We're scared shitless that he will*, he almost said.

She smiled. "Feeling better?"

Jerry nodded and reached for the telephone. "I'd better call Morton. He's probably gonna chew on my forehead about that vacation he wants me to take." He punched out a number.

Ginger went back to her desk and continued working.

Morton's line was busy, so he hung up and waited. He tilted back in his wobbly executive chair and contemplated the bulletin board on the only wall not made of glass. Seven name tags lined the top of of the board like an organizational chart; each name accounted for a homicide detective under his supervision. Underneath each detective's name was listed that of a lower ranking partner, and itemized underneath those were the assigned cases. *Too many cases,* he thought. *Too many hassles, too much politics.*

Captain Morton himself had hinted that Jerry, now 57 and close to retirement, was too set in his ways—too much of a detective—to be an effective supervisor. "That, and you're too private, too aloof, Jerry," the captain had said. *Bull shit*, he thought. *I used to go out drinking with the other detectives until some motherfucker started telling people that I had a drinking problem.* Jerry imagined the criticism around L.A.P.D. Homicide circles: *great detective, lousy supervisor, lush.* Many times he wondered if he'd reached his level of incompetence. Wasn't his

inability to control Mingus a good example? But Jerry knew that his best asset was his highly accurate instinct, his B.S. in criminology notwithstanding. He relied heavily on his gut and cracked more than his share of cases. Surely a finely tuned intuition would make him a good supervisor, too.

He looked at his watch again. He was tired, hungry and anxious to get to his apartment to do some advance packing for a long-delayed, forced vacation. *Department policy,* Morton had said. Jerry never took a vacation on his own and, if left up to him, would work seven days a week. His whole life consisted of being a homicide detective. That's what he did and he loved it.

As he went to fetch his coat and turn out the light, the telephone rang. He looked for Ginger, but she wasn't at her desk. "Morton. Shit," he grumbled, then answered it. "Homicide."

"Jerry?"

He recognized the raspy voice on the other end. "Yeah, Finn."

"I think you'd better see this."

Jerry squinted at Detective Finnigan's sign-out location on a blackboard near the door. He and his partner had been called to investigate a homicide in a swank condo off Sunset Boulevard. "I was just on my way home. Can't it wait?"

"Uhh . . . I just think you'd better take a look," insisted Finnigan softly.

Something in Finnigan's voice alarmed him. "Okay," he said after a pause. "I got the address here."

"Apartment twelve-thirteen."

"See you in thirty minutes." Jerry sighed wearily and hung up. He locked his office door and left.

When Jerry walked through the open apartment door past a uniformed policeman, he felt as if he'd walked into some design creation of Marquis de Sade. The walls of the penthouse apartment were painted royal blue, and the unusually high ceiling was black. The opulent couch, chairs and dining room set were all crafted of black enameled wood with blue velvet upholstery ranging in hue from metallic to royal. Erotic black-and-white prints of men in various stages of leather dress and undress adorned the walls. Heavy blue drapes were open, exposing a terrace with a spectacular view of Hollywood, the Wilshire business district and downtown Los Angeles in the distance. He heard voices and followed the sounds into a hallway to his right. He passed a bedroom and bath, each elegantly furnished. As he walked further down the hallway, the sound of voices became louder, and he recognized the sweet smell of ether.

He reached another bathroom and stopped abruptly as the scent of gore joined the ether. He noticed the word "TAPIR" written in blood on the mirror. The twin sinks and vanity were caked with coagulated blood; the commode and shower curtain were splattered with it. Wet towels without blood stains lay on the blood-splattered carpeting, as if someone had taken a shower after the frenzy.

A young woman dressed in overalls walked past the bathroom toward the living room, glancing at Jerry. The word "Coroner" was printed on the back of her uniform. "Here he is, Fin!" she yelled into the room behind her. "Hello, Lieutenant," she greeted. "Long time no see."

"I'm tied to a desk now. What happened?"

"S and M murder, I guess," she said, moving on. "Gross."

Jerry walked into a back room, carefully avoiding a trail of blood on the carpeting. Entering the dimly lit room, he was blinded by the flash of a camera and squinted at Finnigan, who joined him.

"Thanks for coming, Jerry," the tall, burly redhead said, gesturing toward the far corner. Finnigan had been recording his observations and was stuffing the tape recorder inside his coat pocket. "Reba's in a bedroom on the other side talking to the roommate. Guy says that he was at the same bar when the victim left with some biker. I think we'll have a good description."

The coroner photographer backed away and nodded at Jerry out of respect.

As Jerry's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he found himself staring at a man's body hanging at the ankles by a thick chain, which was looped through a strong ceiling hook and held fast by a winch attached to the wall. The lieutenant inched closer. The man's entire body was encircled by leather straps about eight inches apart. His left hand had apparently been left unbound so that he could masturbate, judging from the dried rivulets of semen clinging to the leather straps across the lower abdomen. His penis had been cut off, but there was little blood at the crotch, indicating to Jerry that the cock had been severed after most of the blood had drained from the body. Jerry lowered his gaze and saw the probable cause of death. The man had been decapitated and his body drained of blood like a slaughtered hog at a Texas barbecue. Nearby lay an electric meat carver and extension chord, still plugged into a wall socket; a rubber hood with slits for eyes, nose and mouth; and a gas mask, which reeked of ether.

"The head's on the terrace," said Finnigan, leading the way.

Jerry remained a few seconds to look around the room, which had been painted and textured to look like a dungeon. Various chains hung from the ceiling, and a medieval-style stretching rack sat in a corner. Wrist and ankle clamps were embedded in the walls at several locations. Across the room was a heavy-duty tripod supporting a video camera of professional quality, while a smaller tripod held an expensive-looking still camera. He glanced again at the gas mask and realized that the ether-impregnated cartridge was making him ill. It reminded him of a tonsillectomy he'd had when he was five. In those days in rural South Texas, the surgeon placed a mask over a patient's mouth and dripped ether or chloroform onto it.

"Any film in the cameras?" asked Jerry, joining Finnigan on the terrace.

"Nothing in the still camera, but there's a cassette in the video camera."

The huge terrace was filled with expensive-looking chaise longues and a glass dining table with stainless steel chairs around it. Tropical plants ringed the area, and a bamboo mobile gently tinkled in the breeze. The sound reminded Jerry of a recent dream. *Surf was crashing nearby and there was the sound of a mobile. Was it bamboo? Metal? A warm, moist mouth enveloped his cock . . . .*

"Jerry?" interrupted Finnigan, pointing at the glass table.

The head sat atop a crystal vase; from a distance it looked like a bouquet of dead flowers. The hair was dark brown and matted with blood. Jerry walked around to the front of the head and looked into a pair of tan eyes. The man appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties. His face was clean-shaven, and his lips formed a grotesque leer. His nose had been excised and his penis had been carefully sutured in its place.

Jerry looked closer and saw that the sutures were even and professional-looking. He took a deep breath of the crisp night air. "So?"

"My gut says series, Jer," Finnigan said, an almost imperceptible shudder in his voice.

"Talk to me," Jerry urged.

"I've never seen . . . hell, I'll never even *heard* of a dick *sewn* to a face. What in holy hell does it mean?

"The mirror said, 'TAPIR.' You suppose this guy is supposed to resemble a goddamn tapir?"

"Looks like that to me."

"So what is the sex angle?" Jerry glanced back at the corpse in the "dungeon."

"The victim shot his wad."

"But did the killer?" Jerry winked at Finnigan and rushed back into the living room to get away from the smell of the ether.

Finnigan followed. "Okay, so serial psychos usually have sex with their victims. Maybe we'll find some semen somewhere."

"Maybe," said Jerry, looking at his watch. "We have to know if this was hate-motivated or psycho."

"Take my word for it, Jer, this stinks of a series. He's psycho and gay, just like Gacy, Dahmer and Kraft. And the nose is nowhere to be found. I looked all over. He took it for a souvenir, Jer. Textbook."

Jerry looked at him wearily. "God, I hope not." He walked into the other bedroom across the living room, which was decorated in vibrant, warm colors. Finnigan's partner, Reba Martin, was questioning a handsome young body builder, now pale, his mind seemingly far away. He was still in shock.

"Hi, Lieutenant," she said, smiling. "Just finishing up."

"Go ahead," said Jerry, crossing his arms and standing back with Finnigan.

Jerry was proud of Reba, a short and wiry woman with a round, pretty face. She looked too young to be a cop, let alone a homicide detective. No one could believe that she was thirty-six and had four children.

"Okay, recap for the lieutenant." She read her notes. "You got to the bar at twelve-thirty and found your roommate talking to a biker, about thirty, dark eyes, with short, curly hair and beard. You never saw the guy before. Your roommate left with this guy a short time later. You got here about two hours after that." She looked up at the young man. "Okay so far?"

The young man looked at Finnigan, then at Jerry, as if noticing them for the first time.

"Okay?" prodded Reba.

The young man shuddered and nodded, his eyes misting over.

"You went right to bed because you were wasted, then got up the next afternoon around two. You left without going into the other side of the apartment, then met a couple of friends for brunch, then got back around four. Finally, you went into your roommate's bedroom a little past five and discovered his body. That's when you called the police."

The young man nodded again, then began to weep softly.

"Finn?" prompted Reba. "You got anything?"

"Did you hear anything after you got home from the bar last night?" asked Finnigan. "Anything at all?"

The young man kneaded his hands nervously. "Uhh . . . no . . . I thought he wasn't here." He waved a hand toward the other side of the apartment. "He usually plays his stereo loud when he . . . " He looked at Reba. " . . . when he entertains. I figured he went to the other guy's place."

"Were you lovers?" asked Jerry bluntly.

"Not for over two years," the young man answered. "I paid rent, and we went our separate ways." His eyes narrowed. "Hey, officer, I didn't kill him."

Jerry held up his hands in a calming gesture. "No one's accusing you of killing him, son." He moved closer to the young man. "Were you ever in on that kind of scene in there?"

The young man shook his head vigorously. "Not *that* deep, man. Courtney was getting hard-core lately; I mean, he was into some really weird shit. He was even selling porno videos and photo sets on the side, and I was about ready to get the hell out."

"How about ether?" asked Jerry. "Did he ever do that kind of stuff?"

The young man screwed up his nose. "Is that what that is? No, he never did as far as I knew. Poppers, yes. Coke, grass, all of it, but not ether."

Jerry turned to Finnigan. "The killer probably brought it to knock him out, then."

"Did you get a really close look at the guy?" asked Jerry. "Did you catch his eye in any way?" Jerry wondered if the young man's life might be in danger.

The young man considered the question. "No, not

really. He was just another biker to me. Mean looking. Leather out the ass. I heard someone say that he followed Courtney's car on a Harley."

Finnigan yawned and stretched. "How 'bout it Jer, let's continue this tomorrow at the station." He glanced at the doorway as he heard the sound of a rattling gurney being brought into the bedroom by two coroner personnel.

"Other side, fellas," said Jerry, looking back at the young man. "Okay with me."

"We have to seal off the apartment, so let Detective Martin here know where you're staying tonight," said Finnigan, nodding at Reba, "Someone'll pick you up and bring you to the station for a few more questions tomorrow morning. "

The young man nodded, his eyes now dry.

Jerry and Finnigan walked out of the bedroom as Reba took down the information. As they reached the apartment entrance, Finnigan stopped, a questioning look on his face.

Jerry read his mind. "You go back. I can't take that smell. See you tomorrow morning."

"I just want to take another look around before they take him away," said Finnigan, heading back into the hallway while pulling out his tape recorder. "Plus I want to play the tape in the guy's tape player. It's a weird album called 'Zoolook.'"

Jerry waved and left.

As he drove to his apartment near West Hollywood, he wondered if Finnigan was right. *If it's another serial killer, then I'm getting out, away from this goddamn city.*

TWO

The Following Morning

Because of the spiraling murder rate that summer, Jerry had been called to L.A.P.D. Headquarters downtown for an emergency meeting of all homicide division commanders. As he returned to the station just after ten-thirty, he found Santoro talking quietly, almost intimately, with Ginger. He nodded in greeting, took a tranquilizer at a water fountain nearby and walked into his office. Santoro followed him and closed the door.

"What the hell do you want?" mumbled Jerry, looking helplessly at a stack of telephone messages.

"Oooo, are we in a foul mood today, sir?" she cooed.

He sighed and looked up at her. "This goddamn city is falling apart, Santo. I just got out of a meeting at City Hall, and the brass are wringing their hands over the rising, *non-gang-related* murder rate—as if it's *our* fault or something." He studied her expression, which spelled more bad news. "Oh, shit." He sat down.

"We got another one, Jerry." She said it softly, as if she was notifying the next of kin of a death.

Jerry felt acutely nauseous and took in a big gulp of air. He reached for an antacid in his desk drawer. "Give it to me."

"Same guy. I compared notes with Finn and Reba. This time he had blue eyes, a moustache and a cowboy hat. He connected with a 'leather daddy' screen writer at a bar on Santa Monica. The victim's name is Goldstein."

"Leather bar?"

"Uniform is more like it. They dress up like cops and bikers and cowboys. Anyway, this Goldstein was about forty-eight and lived near the Hollywood Bowl in the mini-hills. You know, just before you get to the higher elevations with all the palaces and castles." Santoro read from a set of notes. "Shit, I can't read Roberto's writing. Says here he was *blah-dah-de-dah* and didn't have a roommate. The maid came in this morning and found him." She closed the notebook. "The guy was decapitated like the other one, and the head was dramatically placed in a silver tray on the dining room table, surrounded by fresh fruit." She looked up seriously. "And no, I didn't sample the fruit."

Jerry chuckled, thankful that she had the gift of defusing tense situations.

She continued from memory. "Instead of the penis, the killer cut off the guys right index finger and sewed it on the bridge of his nose, like he wanted to make him look like a rhinoceros. 'RHINO' was written on the mirror."

Jerry felt a churning pain in his stomach. "Uniform stitching?"

"Like a surgeon's."

"Did the victim get his rocks off?"

"Both his ankles and the left hand were tied with neckties. Had an old-fashioned brass bed with posts. He apparently got his rocks off with the free hand, but those were the only pecker tracks we found. There was a wash cloth on the floor that smelled of ether."

"Any body parts missing?"

"Yeah, a big toe on the left foot. Couldn't find it anywhere."

Jerry looked out the window. "I tell you what." He looked at the organizational chart. "Let's give this a real push before the newspapers get a hint of a serial. I want you, Roberto, Reba and Finnigan to handle this for the time being, and I'll shuffle around your other cases. This could blow up in our faces."

Santoro nodded.

"I'm really anxious to get the coroner's reports to see if there was semen in the body cavities. So while we wait for that, perhaps you guys should go to these bars and see what you can dig up. Let's round up the people who saw the killer and can describe him. Maybe someone can put their finger on something we don't know about. And get an artist working on drawings so we can feed them to the computer for variations. Maybe we can see through his little disguises and colored contact lenses."

Maria's partner, Roberto Sosa, walked into Jerry's office. "Hello, Lieutenant." Tall, 35ish and good-looking, he had a trim yet imposing physique. His voice was soft and pleasant with a very slight Mexican accent.

Jerry nodded in greeting.

"I just got through talking to that next door neighbor

who wasn't home earlier," began Roberto. "The woman says that she never heard anything at all last night, except when Goldstein and the killer arrived at his house. She said they sounded drunk and boisterous when they first got there and played some weird music for a few minutes. Then, about an hour later, her dogs started barking, and she saw the cowboy going through Goldstein's front gate and walking down the street." As an afterthought, he added: "Oh, yeah, the tape in Goldstein's tape player was the same as the one in the first victim's place. It's something called 'Zoolook,' by this French electronic music dude . . . Jar . . . ."

"Jarre," explained Santoro. "Jean-Michelle Jarre."

The telephone rang and Jerry looked out to see if Ginger would answer it. She wasn't at her desk, so he answered in a disguised voice: "Homicide."

"Lieutenant Zeitler, please."

"Uhh . . . he's not in right now. Can I take a message?"

"You can't fool me, Zeitler," said a familiar voice. "This is Sapperstein with the *Times*, and I understand that you've got another serial killer on your hands."

Jerry's day deteriorated. After the media converged upon the police chief and the mayor, Jerry was called to City Hall and unfairly reprimanded for not warning his superiors. The fact that he'd found out about the second murder only minutes earlier didn't seem to matter. Finally able to break away and return to the station, he found Finnigan and Santoro at odds and near blows with Mingus over who was in charge. Toward late afternoon, he realized that he hadn't eaten lunch and was beginning to get shaky. Eating another of Ginger's candy bars stopped his shaking, but he became extremely exhausted and had to go home early.

Jerry pulled the squad car into a parking stall just underneath his kitchen. Hearing the voice of Paul Simon coming from his next door neighbor's apartment, he followed a narrow sidewalk lined with bird-of-paradise, yucca and palm trees. It was a well-kept, small apartment complex where only a tenant's death created a vacancy. As he reached the top of the outdoor stairway and the entrance to his apartment, his next door neighbor, Rhoda, appeared at her door, dressed in a skimpy kimono. She had obviously been waiting for him.

Jesus, this is the third time in two weeks, he thought. *Turn her down and she comes right back for more. Insult her and she forgets in a couple of weeks.*

"When you drive into your parking space, my apartment . . . *shakes*," she hissed, looking at him hungrily. "Sort of . . . *hot*, isn't it?"

She was a voluptuous, flaming redhead in her early forties. As early as a year ago, Jerry would have taken advantage of such an obvious invitation, but things weren't the same any more.

"Sorta hot, yeah." Jerry smiled as he fumbled for his key.

"How about coming over for a drink?" she prodded, obviously horny.

"Uhh . . . I have to make a couple of important calls and . . . " The essence of a sweet perfume wafted into his nostrils, reminding him of a wild weekend four years ago in Mazatlan. He'd flown there on the spur of the moment with a female prosecutor. Fleeting desire swept over his groin, but cool reason reminded him that he would never be able to perform. "Have to take a rain check, Rhoda."

She pouted. "You always say that. Do you realize that?"

He'd already forgotten his excuse. "Uh . . . no." He stuck his key in the lock.

"You always say, 'Have to take a rain check, Rhoda.' Did you know that?" Her eyes widened in a get-out-of-*that*-one look.

He dropped his hand from the door handle and sighed. "Rhoda?"

"Yes." She squirmed expectantly.

"Do you know what I do for a living?" He looked at her sternly.

"You're a policeman."

"I'm a homicide lieutenant, and I head up the investigation on that serial killer you've been hearing about all day on television." He almost laughed as her face turned pale. "I really don't think I'd be very good company right now, okay?" He hurriedly entered his apartment and closed the door.

Turning on the lights and disrobing in his bedroom, he neatly hung up his suit in the closet. Nude, he walked to the thermostat and turned on the central air conditioning. With a twenty pound layer of fat evenly distributed over a muscular frame, Jerry was dead ringer for an older Rocky Marciano—less the crooked nose—with a touch of Ed Asner's "Lou Grant."

He pulled a short glass from a kitchen cabinet and got some ice cubes from the freezer. From atop the refrigerator he pulled down a half-gallon bottle of Scotch and poured a four-ounce shot over the crackling ice. He sat at his dining room table and turned on the television set with the remote control. Finding all the local stations preoccupied with L.A.'s new serial killer, he turned off the television and tuned his radio to a New Age station.

He looked down at his button of a cock and remembered what his urologist had told him: *Use it or develop prostate problems.* It occurred to him that he'd not had a climax in over four weeks, and that one had taken over an hour to accomplish. As an experiment, he decided to allow Rhoda into a tentative fantasy to see how she would do. He tried to imagine her sucking his cock, but there was no sensation, no mystery. So many of his fantasy objects turned out that way of late, and he briefly wondered if he was becoming asexual. But his bizarre, erotic dreams were proving otherwise. *I just need a good fantasy partner, that's all.*

But Jerry wasn't being exactly honest with himself. There was something exciting lurking there behind the

veils of fuzzy matter. When he drank too much, he toyed with the image but couldn't seem to get it into focus. The same image would come to him in his dreams, but, upon awakening, he could never remember the face or the body. It was a phantom fantasy object, something to sense, not to see. When sober, he pretended it wasn't there.

He took a long, burning sip of his Scotch and sighed as it swiftly entered his bloodstream from his empty stomach. "Let's try it," he whispered, going into his bathroom to get the expensive vacuum pump and accessories he'd purchased two weeks earlier with a prescription from his urologist.

Sitting in an overstuffed chair, he stretched a constrictor ring over the base of the acrylic cylinder as the doctor had shown him. He lubricated his shriveled cock and shy, hugging balls with a lubricant. Carefully positioning the cylinder over his cock, he turned on the small, battery-powered vacuum pump, which was attached to the cylinder by a plastic tube. The vacuum created inside the cylinder made his penis become bloated and red, eventually filling the 2-1/2 inch diameter by 8 inch long cylinder. He stared at his cock in amazement, finding it fat and eager, like when he was younger and offered it to any young, pretty woman who wanted it. Just as the pressure began to feel uncomfortable, he turned the compressor off and stretched the constrictor ring over the lip of the cylinder and on to the base of his hard cock, trapping the blood inside. As he realized that he had mastered the device on his first try, he victoriously shoved his fist into the air and placed the cylinder and compressor on the floor.

He admired his erection and spread more lubricant over the head and shaft. He felt a tingling sensation under the head and found himself wondering what it would be like to suck his own cock. The revelation at once revolted and fascinated him, and he searched for the memory of one of his countless female partners. He grabbed a remnant of a face, then another, but nothing remained coherent. He closed his eyes and tried to conjure the full, moist lips of Captain Morton's secretary, possibly the best cocksucker he'd every known. But it was to no avail.

He closed his eyes and willed his mind to be free and receptive, and suddenly the phantom image was between his legs, sucking loudly, wetly. For the first time, it even talked to him. It whispered words like "delicious" and "fat" and "Daddy." Jerry was afraid to look it in the face and, when he attempted to juxtapose faces of women he knew, the mysterious image retreated. *In anger?* Determined to know who the phantom was, he peeled back all the layers of his defenses, his fears. He felt the hot, wet mouth return and looked down at a bobbing, translucent head. As he reached down and gently pulled the head up, it took on color, density and form. A face appeared and looked up at him with a saliva-dripping grin.

It was the vague image of a man.

The shock sent the image scurrying off to remote memory banks, leaving Jerry with the reality of an angry-red, bloated penis on the verge of eruption. As he masturbated furiously, he heard a small, mocking voice which said, "Come on, do it for science!" He laughed, wondering if he had said it, wondering *why* he had said it, finding it funny anyway. *After all, I have to cum. I have to . . . shoot!*

He gasped and jerked as semen unexpectedly gushed from his slit, covering his huge fist with gloss. Shuddering and whimpering, he bucked with the ejaculations, lunging upward in search of the phantom mouth. As the final drop of semen oozed over his thumb, he moaned in ecstasy. It was the first time in years that he was sure he'd actually drained his prostate gland.

As his pulse rate returned to normal, the import of the male image gnawed at him, but he suppressed it. Re-erecting all his defensive mechanisms, he stared at his frighteningly dark cock and quickly stretched open the constrictor ring to allow the circulation of fresh blood. As he watched his penis shrink and fall into the pool of semen, the memory of the phantom returned, nebulous like before. But it wasn't vague enough to hide the fact that it was a man. The revelation disturbed and intrigued him at the same time.

Jerry shuffled into the bathroom and took a hot shower. He sensed a rebellion rising within him, a need for a change in attitudes. He had to find something else to feed on besides solving murders and chasing fantasies inside a lonely apartment. *Midlife crisis,* he thought, smiling. *Male menopause? And what will I evolve into? Who am I sexually? Who will Jerry Zeitler be fucking this time next year? He's gonna have to start fucking someone, because life is just not worth it otherwise.*

After the shower, he made another drink, then placed a frozen entrée in the microwave oven. Looking around the neat, small apartment, it dawned on him that he had lived there for nearly ten years. *It all passes so fast, and one day you're pushing sixty and alone.* He calculated in his head how many years had passed since his wife Jo had died. *She died in sixty-eight,* he thought. *God, that's almost twenty-three years.* More memories of Jo began to surface in his mind, but he suppressed them, too.

And then he remembered that ill-fated night when he'd come the closest to fucking Rhoda, the woman next door.

"And you managed to stay single this long?" She seemed amazed.

"I was too busy spending seven years in night school earning a BS in Criminology—no small feat for a cop with funny working hours. That, and I had two daughters to raise." He didn't want to get on the subject of his daughters.

"I'm impressed . . . . Your daughters. Where are they now?"

"The older one lives in Riverside and the other one's in Torrence," he answered impatiently, staring at her ample breasts and wondering if she was adept at sucking cock.

"Tell me about them."

He chased a morsel of stew with a sip of wine. "Some other time."

"Oh." She seemed embarrassed.

He reconsidered. "The older one is a religious fanatic, and I like to say 'shit' and 'fuck' and anything else I please. My younger daughter's been married four times and can't say no to drugs." He silently burped. "I don't hear from them too much, okay?" He poured Rhoda more wine. "My parents died years ago and my two older brothers died in . . . let's see . . . John died in eighty-one and Hank died in eighty-seven. No one left but me."

"I'm sorry," she offered.

"I'm not." He raised his glass, then leaned forward in an intimate toast. "I don't need **anyone**. *It would be great if I could find a nice, good looking woman like you who'd be interested in me, but I can live without it. After losing a wife to suicide and being . . . rejected by my own flesh and blood, I developed a crust. The type of work I do makes that crust a little thicker. Does that make any sense to you?"*

He leaned back and studied her. It was obvious that Rhoda had seen something that caused her to stop and take inventory, but he didn't care. He could take her or leave her. Her choice.

"You still want to fuck?" he asked, licking the rim of the glass.

He laughed as he remembered how she had left in a huff. "As Finnigan would have said, 'That ain't no way to make out with a lady.'"

Jerry finished his meal and attempted to watch a movie but kept nodding off. At eleven o'clock, he groggily got out of the overstuffed chair and took his nightly five milligrams of Micronase for borderline diabetes. Having forgotten to do it earlier, he also took fifty milligrams of Tenormin for high blood pressure. Because of the alcohol, he would forgo the half milligram of Xanax, his tranquilizer. As he walked into the bedroom and set the alarm clock, he began to feel anxious and wondered why alcohol didn't sedate him any more. Turning off the lights he crawled into the cool double bed and wondered where he would go on his forced vacation. He settled on Las Vegas. A hooker wouldn't consider it strange if he used his pump, and the drinks were cheap. But most of all, he could get back within a couple of hours in case his department needed him.

That settled, he rolled over and patiently awaited sleep.

THREE

The Next Morning

"All right, shut up!" barked Jerry, getting everyone's attention. "Let's get this staff meeting over with." He sat at a conference table inside a room barely large enough to accommodate the table, let alone the six people who crowded around it. Santoro and Finnigan flanked Jerry, and Mingus, Kenzo and Anderson occupied the other half of the table.

Herbert Mingus' ice-blue eyes reminded Jerry of those of the Hannibal Lecter character in *Silence of the Lambs*. As usual, he was surly and cleverly vicious, showing little respect for Jerry, who long ago had ceased trying to get him transferred. After all, Mingus was now mysteriously in league with Deputy Chief Caiazza. Jerry held back on dispatching Mingus, hoping he could get something concrete on Caiazza, who was suspected of being involved with the Mafia. For that reason, Jerry maintained a "drinking buddy" friendship with a mid-level Internal Affairs official by the name of Lieutenant Ross. According to Ross, Caiazza was once being secretly investigated by both Internal Affairs and the FBI, but the Internal Affairs investigation had been suspiciously called off. Even the FBI investigation seemed to be bogging down from what Ross could tell. Jerry just assumed that Mingus was likewise involved in the same shady operations and made sure that the detective and his partner never got assigned to an important case.

Kenzo Tsuda was almost forty and was the most clever member of the department. He had a sense of humor that never failed to lift everyone's spirits. He was perfectly matched with a huge, powerful black man by the name of Ben Steele, who rarely said anything and merely grinned when his senior partner was performing.

Kevin Anderson was a tall, blond man in his late thirties. Since he openly admitted living with the same older man for over fifteen years, Jerry and the others merely assumed he was gay and left it at that. He was a superb cop, and his partner, Rich Taylor, a thin, homely-looking man with eight kids, seemed to idolize him.

"Well," began Jerry, "since we now have a *possible* serial killer on our hands, looks like we'll have to rearrange our assignments. The papers are creating a frenzy, and the television reporters are getting on the boss's nerves."

"What? Another one?" asked Anderson. "When?"

"Last night," answered Finnigan. "That makes three in as many days."

"Sounds like Full Moon with a change of sexual preference," offered Mingus, strangely gloating at Jerry.

Jerry tried to ignore the remark, but the timbre of Mingus' voice seemed to recommend careful scrutiny. Pretending indifference, he nodded at Finnigan.

Finnigan began the briefing. "We have all the reports on the first two victims now. We have hair samples from the towels the killer used when he showered after each killing, but no blood or tissues samples of the perpetrator. No struggle. Since he didn't track out any blood, we assume he did the dirty deed in the buff. No prints on the meat carvers and butcher knives—which all belonged to the victims, by the way. Nothing of value in the video camera on the first case. Looks like a ten-minute segment was erased, though. But the perplexing thing is that the coroner's office didn't find any foreign semen in any body cavity, nor did they find evidence of penetration. That strongly indicates that the guy isn't your typical serial

killer." He glanced at Jerry. "Lieutenant feels that maybe the killer is *faking* a serial to hide his real motives."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Santoro. "What about Son of Sam and that guy two years ago who shot people at random . . . ."

"Son of Sam killed lovers. That's the sexual angle," offered Kenzo.

"So? Where was his semen deposited?" Santoro shot back, scanning the faces of Jerry and Finnigan.

"I know," sang Kenzo. "He deposited it . . . ."

"In a sperm bank," interrupted Santoro, groaning.

"The typical serial killer," explained Jerry, "according to the FBI and most criminologists, is a sexually dysfunctional man—not a woman—who lives by himself or with his folks. He just doesn't know how to have healthy sexual relationships." Jerry realized that he was describing himself and swallowed with difficulty to suppress a laugh. "He usually gets drunk or stoned before he kills someone. Rape and killing are the only things that give him sexual gratification. He's your typical violent rapist or necrophiliac and he almost always leaves a load of jissom." *Hey, Ma, maybe I'm a necrophiliac!* Jerry's lips quivered as he struggled to remain looking serious.

"Maybe he's more like David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam," said Finnigan. "Some experts argued that he was motivated by power and dominance instead of sex, but the heavyweights didn't agree. Where is our killer's semen? Don't know, but I'll bet he dropped a load somewhere."

"Maybe he shoots dry," contributed Anderson.

The others expected another Kenzo-style joke but realized that the handsome cop was serious.

"You know . . . when a guy has a prostatectomy," continued Anderson. "He can still have a climax, but nothing comes out."

Finnigan glanced at Jerry. "We got another angle, then."

Jerry shook his head. "The hairs on the towels didn't match the foreign hairs found on the victims' body. There was definitely no attempt at penetration."

"If you guys keep listening to all these self-appointed experts, you'll never learn anything," said Mingus with a leer. "Depending on who you listen to, a typical serial killer is unmarried and lives with his parents, as Jerry says. But I've read that other . . . *experts* . . . say that he's happily married and living in a *comfort zone*." Mingus made a fist with his yellow-stained fingers and coughed into it. "One expert says that he's got a high I.Q. and another says he's got a *low* I.Q." He looked at Jerry and smiled proudly. "If you want to catch this fucker, you have to get into his head."

Finnigan continued. "Then there's the trophy angle—he cuts off a body part and apparently keeps it for a souvenir—and we got the dramatic presentation of the head, the message on the mirror."

"I heard he uses ether," said Kenzo.

Finnigan nodded. "He uses ether and always goes for the leather guys who like that bondage shit, you know, where they tie someone up and place a gas mask over his head and drip that butyl nitrite stuff into the filter. The victim is apparently out like a light when his throat's cut, which accounts for the lack of struggle. There is always a copy of Jarre's 'Zoolook' in a tape player nearby. No prints on it. Obviously belongs to the killer, so we assume the music has a meaning."

"The papers call the killer 'Zooloo,'" added Jerry, shaking his head in amazement. "Some goddamn editor with a journalism degree left off the 'k' and it stuck. But the thing that has us hog-tied the most is that this Zooloo character always neatly cuts off an appendage when the blood's all drained, and he takes pains sewing it on the head somewhere. The first one had his cock attached to where his nose was and the second one had a finger sewn to the bridge of his nose. And the one last night?" He looked at Finnigan.

The redhead grimaced and swallowed. "The guys whole hand was attached to the top of his head. He looked like a fucking rooster." His voice lowered. "We have no idea why he does this."

"Zoo," mused Kenzo. "Zoolook, zooloo . . . zoo." He glanced at Jerry, then Finnigan. "Animals: tapir, rhino, rooster."

The group looked at Kenzo in stunned silence, then began to fidget in their chairs.

"We're organizing a task force today and Finnigan will head it up while I go on my *forced* vacation," said Jerry.

The others groaned playfully.

"Where ya goin', boss, to Cancun with some young fox?" teased Santoro.

All but Mingus laughed and looked closely at Jerry for a reaction.

"I don't know about Cancun, but I'll bet he's gonna fuck someone's brains out somewhere," offered Kenzo.

Jerry smiled and looked down. He wondered what they would think if he told them that he was going to Las Vegas because being alone there wasn't so bad. *No one knows me*, he lamented. "Like I said, Finnigan will head it up and also fill in for me while I'm gone."

Mingus glowered at Finnigan.

"Santoro will be second-in-command. That means that four detectives—Roberto and Reba with Santo and Finn—will be the focal point of the investigation. We'll pull in people from other departments—vice and auto theft—to fill in and do a lot of the leg work." Jerry glanced at Mingus, then at Kenzo and Anderson. "We'll use the rest of you on overtime if this thing gets out of hand, okay?"

"No, it's not okay," snapped Mingus. "I've been in this fucking department longer than anyone, and I got closer to Full Moon than any of you." He glared at Jerry. "I'm a top-flight detective, Jerry, and you damned well know it."

Jerry nodded in agreement.

"Then why do you allow Finnigan and this . . . this female Mike Tyson to outrank me?"

"Watch your fucking mouth," threatened Santoro.

"Get out," Jerry said menacingly to Mingus. "Meeting's

over for you."

"You have no right to humiliate me, Jerry," said Mingus, his eyes inflamed, his voice cracking with hatred.

Anderson stared at Mingus with disgust.

Mingus turned on him. "And what are you looking at, you faggot? You, *a quota*, looking down your nose at *me!*"

As Anderson jumped up, Jerry quickly intervened and pushed him back down into his seat. He opened the door for Mingus. "You're suspended for three days, Herb. You're not going to ruin the morale of *my* department!" He turned to the others. "Meeting's adjourned."

Visibly shaken, Jerry stormed into his office, slammed the door and called Captain Morton.

As expected, Mingus' suspension was overridden within ten minutes by Deputy Chief Caiazza. But Jerry took advantage of the outburst anyway and had a letter of reprimand drawn up for the troublemaker's file. That made two sound and justified letters so far, and Jerry knew that it would only take one more to start proceedings of dismissal in front of Internal Affairs and the union. Not stopping there, Jerry called Mingus and his partner into his office to advise them of their new assignments, hoping that Mingus would commit the sin that would get him his final letter of reprimand: insubordination.

Mingus entered Jerry's office and sat, not meeting Jerry's eyes. Jerry knew the man was no fool and was probably aware that it would not be in his best interest to be insubordinate, especially with witness Finnigan sitting in the corner, watching every move he made. In addition, Ginger and tens of support personnel and detectives were sitting outside Jerry's office and watched through the glass, sensing a confrontation.

Mingus' partner, Jake Cryder, walked in after getting a drink of water from a fountain outside. He sat down and cockily nodded at Jerry. Jake was the 30-year-old son of a retired police captain who was a crony of Caiazza. A menacing-looking body builder with eyes like Mingus, he'd been suspended once for viciously beating a Samoan man during the breakup of a domestic dispute. When he was a rookie, he was cleared of the suspicious shooting of a gay man who had pulled a knife, some witnesses said, in order to protect himself from a savage beating at the hands of Cryder. There were even rumors that he was a member of a neo-Nazi group and was secretly trying to recruit area policemen for the organization.

"We've got some knew assignments for you guys," Jerry said, reading from a sheet of paper. "You'll take over cases . . . ." He glanced up at each man. "Who's going to write this down?"

Mingus nodded disgustedly at Cryder, who pulled out a note pad and a pencil.

Jerry continued. "Cases ninety-HD . . . dash . . . four, eleven, sixteen, twenty, twenty-six . . . and . . . thirty." He looked up and smiled.

Cryder frowned as he looked down at the pad.

Mingus smirked. "Four? That's history, Jerry. That's that wino case last year. You're giving us the fucking dregs."

"Why can't we work on the Zooloo case?" asked Cryder.

Jerry leaned back in his chair. "Because you guys are the best ones to really dig into these older cases and come up with some fresh ideas. You're methodical . . . and thorough," he said facetiously. "Just the right team to clear them up and make us the crack unit we have the potential to be."

"You're full of shit, Jerry," spat Mingus.

"Are you refusing the assignment?" asked Jerry, his gaze locked on Mingus, his voice even and calm.

Mingus and Cryder looked at each other and shrugged.

"You can go," the lieutenant said softly.

The two detectives hesitated, then quietly got up and walked out, glancing back with contempt at the equally contemptuous stares from the bull pen.

Jerry turned to Finnigan. "Okay, let's get going. We got a lot of heat on our tails."

FOUR

That Night

The latest hot mix blared from the huge speakers around the ceiling. Hundreds of men in leather, rubber and denim attire stood close to each other, each nursing bottles of beer or mineral water. It was Friday night in the hottest gay leather bar in West Hollywood.

"Incredible." Mark Graham shook his head sadly and leaned toward his leather-bedecked friend, Paxton. "This place has the best dance music in Southern California and you can't even dance," he said with a slight Texas accent. He almost had to yell to be heard over the noise. "I think that's terrible."

Paxton frowned. "Where would they *put* a dance floor? Besides, if they built a dance floor, it wouldn't attract the machos. Wanna dance? Go to that place down the street and dance with the kids. This is *not* dance music. It's dramatic leather bar music: good for cruising and posing."

"That's not my point. I'd gladly go down the street if they played this kind of music. Why don't they?"

A bare-chested man with a studded leather vest and cap squeezed past Paxton's frail body, nudging him into Mark. He was in his fifties with a brawny, stocky body. The man glanced at Paxton, then at Mark, finally resting his gaze on Mark's ample crotch. He took a sip of beer then smiled and walked away.

"And you said I wasn't dressed for this joint," teased Mark, looking down at his jeans, T-shirt and wind breaker.

"Just goes to show. If you're hung, the costume don't mean shit."

"Why don't they play this kind of music at dance joints, Pax?" pushed Mark, playfully. *"I must know."*

"Ask the big guy," said Paxton, nodding toward the older man in the leather vest and cap. "That's the fourth time he's cruised you."

"Really?" Mark scanned the immediate area. "Where

did he go?"

"He's getting another beer at the bar."

Both men watched as the bare-chested man got his beer and struggled through the mass of swaying men.

"He turn you on?" Paxton asked. "Why do you always go for these older farts?"

"Hey, you little shit, you go for who you want, and I'll do my thing," Mark said, playfully indignant.

"Well, I'm going into the back with all the clones and see if I can find someone who likes skinny guys without a whole lot of testosterone."

"I'll probably still be here."

"If not, I'll call you in a couple of days," said Paxton, snaking his way toward the rear of the huge bar.

The man with the leather vest approached Mark again. "Where'd your friend go?"

"To find someone to sleep with," countered Mark.

"Good. Let's go to my place."

Mark was impressed with his directness. "I'd like to but . . . "

"The prelude to a kiss off. But what?"

"Uh . . . " Mark sized him up. "I'm not into S and M. Your uniform . . . "

The big man shook his head. "I'm too old."

"Oh, no," Mark said quickly. "I *like* older guys."

"There *is* a God," the man said, looking upward with a huge grin.

"I'm just a little leery of leathermen in light of the killer out there."

"The papers say he's younger."

"Whatever. I'm not into pain, you see, and . . . "

"Neither am I, and I'm very flexible . . . and very careful." He held out his hand. "Tom Thornton."

Mark shook the large hand and felt the heat rising between them. "Mark Graham."

Tom rolled his eyes toward the exit. Unable to resist, Mark followed the big man outside, past a line of young men waiting to get inside.

Walking through the empty apartment building foyer, Mark noticed that Tom was older yet more attractive in the better light.

Tom glanced at him. "Did I drive too fast for you?"

Like a maniac, thought Mark. "No," he said. "There were no more visitor parking spots in your lot, so I parked about a block away."

"You plus or minus?" asked Tom.

"I'm HIV negative," said Mark, "if that's what you're getting at. But I play like I'm positive. You?"

"I don't do anal sex. You mind?"

"Suits me."

"I don't have beer. What else do you drink?"

"Scotch . . . anything, really," said Mark, following Tom toward the elevator. "Is this in Hollywood or West Hollywood?"

"Beverly Hills," said Tom, smiling as Mark gave him a doubting look. "Just kidding. We're in sleazy Hollywood. You don't know your way around, do you?"

"I just moved here from San Francisco about a year ago."

"Like it here?" asked Tom, contemplating Mark's crotch.

"No."

"Very few people like both places. I'll bet you're dying to get back to the Bay Area."

"I don't like either one, really."

Tom seemed surprised. "So where do you want to live?" He led Mark into the elevator.

"San Antonio."

"I thought you had a southern accent. So why did you ever leave?" Tom pressed the button for the fourth floor.

"I got transferred to San Francisco, then down here," said Mark, anxious to get Tom in bed. "I work for a department store chain as a buyer."

"How old are you?" asked Tom, kissing his guest lightly on the lips.

"Thirty-eight. You?

"Fifty-two." He appeared thoughtful. "I think I have Scotch, but I know I have gin."

"Gin's fine."

"And grass."

"Fucks up my sinuses."

"And a little cocaine."

"Never touch the stuff."

"Oh. Too bad."

As the elevator door opened, Mark saw a man with long platinum hair standing in an apartment doorway across the hall. He appeared to be built and dressed like a lean professional wrestler and seemed to be undecided about whether to go back in or grab the elevator. Tom glanced at the man, too, then walked toward his door. Mark followed, but felt compelled to look back once more. As he did, the man returned his gaze with a stare that made Mark shudder. Then Mark noticed that the man's hair was actually an askew wig which didn't quite cover a narrow tuft of short, brown hair.

The elevator door opened again and the man disappeared.

"Know that guy?" asked Mark, following Tom into his apartment and closing the door.

"Probably one of Allan's tricks. He's into really heavy bondage. I mean, he likes to be completely incapacitated and brought near suffocation. Otherwise, he's just your average insurance salesman."

"Did you see the eyes on that guy?" Mark shuddered again.

Tom disregarded the question and busily looked for a bottle of Scotch. "No Scotch. How about gin and tonic?"

"Fine." Mark walked into the modest living room and sat on a worn sofa. He couldn't get the strange image of the man in the hallway out of his mind.

"What do you like for breakfast?" Tom asked from the kitchen.

"Do you plan to keep me all night? What if I'm a dud?"

Tom emerged from the kitchen with two drinks. With an impish smile on his face, he placed the drinks on a coffee table and straddled Mark with his knees. "I know you're not."

They kissed and Tom began unbuttoning Mark's shirt. "I love brown eyes and hard, hairy bodies," he whispered, pulling Mark's shirt free of his trousers and immediately sucking on his hardening nipples.

"You're pushing buttons that haven't been pushed in a long time, my friend," Mark warned.

"Never know," Tom cooed between slurps, "this might be the beginning of a great friendship."

"And wouldn't that be nice?" chuckled Mark as he anxiously unbuttoned Tom's shirt.

Fully undressed, they locked onto each other and made love with abandon.

Returning to the bed after urinating, Mark heard the vague sound of someone entering an apartment down the hall. He carefully got back into bed and curled up on his side. At first, the cries were muffled, then they became piercing, accompanied by banging on Tom's apartment door. Hearing the yells, Tom bolted out of bed and put on a robe. He ran to the door and opened it.

"Tom! Tom! Oh, my God. *Oh, my God!* " someone wailed. It's Allan! Someone killed him!"

Mark numbly reached for his clothes on a chair nearby. He didn't want to confront the obvious tragedy outside. Again, the image of savage eyes came; he seriously considered just leaving to avoid the involvement. Instead, he groped through the darkness and followed dim lights to the hallway outside the apartment. He saw a young leatherman crouched against the wall opposite the elevator. He glanced in the other direction and saw a handful of tenants peering cautiously around their doors. The young man was silent and in a daze. Mark looked past him at the doorway of the next apartment. A coughing sound came from inside, then the sound of moaning. He entered the apartment and followed the sounds to a bathroom. Tom was bent over the commode, vomiting. The word "ELEPHANT" was written in blood on the mirror and there was blood splattered and smeared all over the bathroom.

Hesitantly, Mark walked into the adjacent bedroom and saw the nude, headless body of a man lying spread eagle on the blood-soaked bed. From the corner of his vision to the right, he detected an ominous form atop a chest of drawers. Slowly, he looked around and focused on the severed head of Allan, the insurance salesman who got turned on by near-suffocation. Blue lifeless eyes gave no hint of the unspeakable horror that had visited the room. In place of the nose was a section of Allan's rectum and colon, still glistening with mucous and blood. It had been carefully sutured to the man's face.

Mark felt faint and realized that he'd been holding his breath. He gasped and fell back against the wall, causing the victim's head to fall off the chest-of-drawers with a sickening, sloshing CRACK. He watched helplessly as the head came to rest against his right foot and the fashioned "trunk" flopped over both his shoes. Then the smell of blood and excrement reached his nostrils and he ran into the hallway, unable to hold back the vomit.

Sipping straight gin, Mark absently watched the uniformed policeman as he spoke into Tom's telephone. Tom came from the bedroom and sat next to Mark. He was pale and shaking.

"How is he?" asked Mark, glancing at his freshly washed shoes, shuddering at the memory of the colon draped over them.

"I gave him two of my sleeping pills. Maybe he'll sleep."

The policeman hung up the telephone and entered something into a notebook.

"Can I go now?" Mark asked.

"Not yet, sir," said the policeman. "The homicide guys'll want to ask you some questions." He left for the other apartment.

"Sorry I got you into this," Tom said.

"I'm sure you didn't arrange it." Mark tried to smile. "I'll be back."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Or better still . . . you want to stay at my place tonight?"

"No. I'd better stay with him. They were pretty good to me when I was out of work."

Next door, Jerry studied the bedroom as technicians dusted for fingerprints and a photographer took numerous shots of the scene.

Finnigan came from the bathroom. "See the signature?"

"Yeah, I noticed," mumbled Jerry, trying to figure out how the killer had excised the rectum and colon so cleanly. "Where's Reba?"

"I have her running down leads. No sense in you and her both being here."

"What's the matter, boss cramping your style?" Jerry teased.

"Hey, I'm the fucking boss in three days, man." Jerry pointed at himself proudly. "By the way, that tape called 'Zoolook' is in the tape player."

"Make a note to check with the record stores. See if anyone remembers selling several copies of that tape to anyone."

Finnigan nodded and mumbled the reminder on his tape recorder.

Jerry squinted in the direction of the gaping hole underneath the victim's testicles.

"What are you looking at?" asked Finnigan.

Jerry moved past a coroner technician. "Excuse us a second."

As the technician moved aside, Jerry squatted at the foot of the bed and stared at the opening. "Hand me a

plastic glove, will you?" he asked the technician, who reached inside a pocket and produced one. Jerry placed it on his right hand and gently lifted up the ball sac. He looked up at Finnigan. "See this?"

Finnigan knelt next to Jerry and got as close as he could. "Jesus."

A condom was embedded in a glob of feces and blood.

Both men slowly got to their feet and looked at each other. Jerry carefully pulled off the glove and dropped it on the floor.

"Where is the roommate and the other two guys?" Jerry asked.

"Apartment to the right," Finnigan said absently, staring at the new evidence.

As Jerry walked into Tom's apartment, Mark was massaging Tom's neck as both men stared gloomily into glasses of gin.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Lieutenant Zeitler." He stood looking at them with a hint of a smile. "Who's the roommate?"

"He's asleep in my bedroom. I gave him a couple of sleeping pills," answered Tom.

Jerry shook his head and sighed. "I wish you hadn't done that, sir." He read from a slip of paper and glanced at Mark, then Tom. "Who's Thornton?"

Tom nodded. "Me."

Jerry turned his attention to Mark. "And you must be Graham."

"That's right." Mark felt a strong attraction to Jerry, but it was tempered by a feeling that the policeman was homophobic.

"Did you both know the victim?" Jerry sat in a chair opposite them.

"Just me," said Tom, glancing at Mark. "He's never been here before."

Jerry half-smiled. "I see."

"Something funny, Lieutenant?" asked Mark, surprised at his boldness. He remembered unfortunate dealings with homophobic cops in Dallas. And Jerry's accent sounded very Texan.

Jerry's smile disappeared. "No insult intended, Mister Graham. Uhh . . . the patrolman said you saw a man coming out of the apartment. What happened then?"

"As we got off the elevator, he got on," Tom said.

"Can you give me a description?" Jerry took out a notebook and pen.

"I didn't get a good look at all," said Tom. "All I saw was this platinum hair and I thought it was a woman at first."

Jerry wrote in the notebook, not looking up. "You?"

Mark envisioned hours of questioning and the review of endless mug shots and lineups. He'd already been through something similar in Texas when a friend was murdered by a hustler. "Same here," Mark lied. "I didn't get a good look." Mark vividly remembered identifying the murderer of his friend, only to ultimately watch him go free after a legal defense of justified homicide. In some parts of Texas, a pass made by a homosexual was considered tantamount to brandishing a deadly weapon.

Music from the tape called "Zoolook" began to play in the next apartment, catching Mark's attention.

"You familiar with that music?" asked Jerry, watching Mark closely.

"Yes, it's by Jean-Michelle Jarre. The album's called 'Zoolook.'" Mark looked into Jerry's eyes and felt intimidated. "It's unusual music, but quite brilliant."

"Where would someone buy it?" asked Jerry, his eyes narrowing as he hoped Mark would shed some light on the mysterious tape.

"Tower Records on Sunset, probably. They have everything. Jarre sells out everywhere else."

"What's the music all about?"

"It's way out in left field. Lots of exotic animal sounds. What's unique about it is that Jarre used human voices and electronically transformed them into animal sounds. He used languages like Aboriginal, Turkish, Sioux, Arabic . . . everything."

Transforming human to animal, thought Jerry. "You know your music."

Mark shrugged, still wary of the lieutenant.

Jerry stood up and placed the notebook and pen on the coffee table in front of Mark. "Like for you both to write down your name, address and telephone number. We might want to ask you a few questions later."

Tom reached for an address book and placed it next to the notebook. "Write yours down for me, too."

Jerry rolled his eyes up.

Mark noticed. "Tom, I think the lieutenant finds us amusing." He wrote in Jerry's notebook.

"I'm a public servant, Mister Graham . . . for straights *and* gays."

Mark looked up, smiling sarcastically. "Bull shit."

"Whatever, Mister Graham," said Jerry, returning the look.

"Can I leave now?" asked Mark indifferently, writing his name and address inside Tom's address book.

"Yeah," Jerry answered, gesturing toward the door.

Mark kissed Tom on the lips and patted his thigh. Ignoring the lieutenant, he quickly left the apartment.

As he waited for the elevator, Jerry joined him.

"Oh, Mister Graham." Jerry rubbed the back of his neck and looked down. "Perhaps you didn't get a good look at the man. But if he's the killer, I'm sure he got a good look at you."

Mark felt a chill spreading throughout his body. Then the elevator arrived.

"You won't reconsider?"

Mark held the door open until a buzzer sounded angrily. "It was like I told you, Lieutenant." He stepped into the elevator and released the door.

"Then be very careful getting home, Mister Graham."

Mark let the door close and tried to wipe away the memory of the falling head. But instead of erasing the image, he managed to make it even more vivid. The

elevator abruptly stopped at the lobby floor, and the door noisily flew open. Mark braced himself for the sight of a raised, knife-brandishing fist, but there was only a bare marble wall.

Walking through the lobby, Mark saw two policemen at the entrance. Red lights flashed through the frosted glass behind them.

One of the policemen held a hand phone. "Here he comes." Then to Mark: "You Graham?"

Mark nodded and the policeman allowed him to walk through the double door. He wasn't prepared for what he saw.

A coroner's van and several squad cars were parked at the curb. In spite of the late hour, a handful of uniformed police stood at barricades, keeping a sizeable crowd away from the building. Four television news trucks were parked at the perimeter of the crowd, and several reporters with microphones rushed toward Mark, followed by cameramen and assistants, scrambling to keep up. Bright lights came on, blinding him.

"Officer, can you tell us what's going on in there?" asked a woman.

"He's not a cop, you idiot," someone shouted from a rival television station.

"We understand there are witnesses this time," said a man. "Did you see anything?"

Mark rushed through the crowd, shielding his face from the cameras. Reaching his new Pontiac Gran Prix, he turned around and stared at the mass of confusion. Then he realized just how vulnerable he really was and had the feeling that he was being watched.

FIVE

Later That Morning

Jerry had just fallen asleep when the telephone rang. It was Sergeant Braidman, the Zooloo Task Force coordinator borrowed from the West L.A. Division.

"I hate to wake you, Jerry, but we're missing a man at Tom Thornton's building. I just sent a squad over."

"Ah, *shit!*" spat Jerry, rubbing his eyes. "What the fuck time is it?"

"Three-thirty. His partner just called me from the building. He went out for coffee; when he got back, the guy was gone."

Jerry heard a commotion over the line.

"Oh, my God . . . Jerry . . . ?"

"What, Braidman. What?"

"I just heard it over the radio. They found him in a janitor's closet. Knife through the back into the heart. He's dead."

"Have them check on Thornton and call Finnigan. I'm on my way."

Jumping into sneakers and a jogging suit, he ran out of the apartment.

Jerry sat slumped in an armchair, staring vacantly at Tom Thornton's shirtless body on the floor. The big man's throat had been slashed, and there were cigarette burns over his chest and neck. "Son of a BITCH!" he blurted.

Finnigan, Reba and the coroner personnel all turned, startled.

"What about Graham? Thornton's address book is missing," said Jerry.

"I've already put two West L.A. vice out front to beef up the two inside," said Finnigan. "One of the guys in the building says no problems. He woke Graham up to see if he was okay. Told him that he had the wrong apartment." He studied Jerry's face for approval. "I figured you didn't want him to know. Want to bring him into protective custody?"

Jerry scratched his head. "No. Let him sleep. It'll be rough enough on him tomorrow."

"Think he'll cooperate?" asked Finnigan.

"If he doesn't, I'll break his goddamn neck," Jerry grumbled.

"I don't get it," said Reba. "If neither Graham nor Thornton looked at the guy, then why would the killer take the chance to go after them?"

"Graham lied," Jerry revealed. "He got a *real* good look at that sonofabitch."

"But why would he deny it?" asked a perplexed Reba. "Is a serial killer less evil than *we* are?"

"It appears that way, doesn't it?" Jerry stared into the Oriental pattern of the worn carpeting. "A log of gays seem to have a chip on their shoulders nowadays. In a way, I can't blame them. Before AIDS, every cocksucker in the country wanted to live in California, the . . . the *mecca*. What is it about San Francisco and L.A.? They came here and went nuts. They killed their livers with booze and sniffed cocaine and poppers by the fucking ton. Before they started dying with AIDS, they packed into the back rooms and alleys and baths and *everything* went on. And I mean EVERYTHING. Finn, remember when we staked out that seedy bar on Sunset and followed that suspect into a back room? Jeez, the smell of shit and poppers was worse than Zooloo's ether!" Jerry realized what he'd said. *"But not tonight*. He didn't use it tonight because he wanted Thornton to tell him where Graham lives." He stared at Thornton's body again. "I wonder if Thornton told the sonofabitch?"

Finnigan and Reba half-listened to Jerry, watching the coroner personnel sift for clues.

"What attracts them here? The suicidals, the gang bangers, the Night Stalkers, the Full Moons, the Zoloos--why here? Hell, military doctors train in L.A.'s trauma centers, for crissakes! All that carnage. Like a crazy zone . . . a killing zone." Jerry realized that he was rambling and being diplomatically ignored.

Finnigan glanced at Jerry and shrugged his shoulders out of respect.

Suddenly, Jerry remembered the roommate. "Jesus, I forgot." He jumped up and walked toward the bedroom. "What about the roommate from next door?"

"We woke him up to question him, and he freaked out,"

said Reba. "He took one look at Thornton and went catatonic."

Finnigan nodded. "Yeah. Don't think you'll see that guy outside a nut ward anytime soon."

Jerry sat down again and closed his eyes.

Driving to his apartment, he kept hearing Roberta Flack singing "If Ever I See You Again" in his mind. He wondered why that song of all songs was haunting him. He wondered who he wanted to see again. *Jo? Who? Who am I pining for?*

Inside his apartment, he contemplated having another drink, but decided that even a couple of hours worth of sleep was better than nothing.

The alarm sounded, interrupting a bizarre dream about a muscular black woman with a strapped-on dildo. He'd never considered the prospect of being sodomized and certainly never dreamed about such a thing before. Strangely, it didn't repulse him. On the contrary, it excited him, and he noticed that he had a semi-erection. Unwilling to ignore a fresh fantasy, he pumped himself up with the vacuum device and popped an elastic band in place at the base of his penis. He remembered his urologist recommending that he massage his prostate with a dildo—something he never did. But it intrigued him now, and he rummaged through a closet looking for the one he'd bought at a sex shop on Santa Monica Boulevard. Finding the nine-inch-long dildo still inside its shrink-wrapped package, he stared at it and considered that he was becoming deranged. *Fuck that! Didn't a goddamned doctor recommend it?* He tore the wrapper away.

Standing in the bathroom, he greased up the dildo with vaseline and almost yelped as he pushed too hard against his opening. Lying down on the bed with a towel under his hips, he tried again, grimacing until the head of the dildo was past both sphincters. And then it ceased hurting and began to feel good. An array of emotions swirled around him as he tried to again visualize the black female in his dream. A brilliant, vivid image streaked by and he held on to it, looking into the tan eyes of a black woman with huge, firm breasts. She growled at him playfully and licked his chin with a long, red tongue. Looking down at the thick dildo strapped to her crotch, she fluttered her tongue and guided the dildo into his ass.

She began to fade, prompting him to yell: "No, don't go!" And then her face was shrouded as she pumped the dildo into him, grunting louder . . . lower . . . *LOWER?* Her arms were now as big as his and so velvety and hairless. The dildo ruptured and filled his rectum like a hot enema.

Thin, hot semen sprayed from his slit as the vague images dissipated. His mind reverberated with the sounds of low, feral grunts. Unable to fathom any of it, he frantically pumped his cock, joyfully watching as the liquid shot into the air, like when he was a pubescent youth. He thought of the real dildo and checked to find it almost buried to the hilt.

As he showered, he felt a slight burning sensation near his bladder and somehow knew that it was his prostate awakening from years of neglect.

SIX

Later That Morning

It was a routine Mark had grown to hate, but he knew of no way out. First, the newspaper at the corner, then the coffee at the diner, then the six-block walk to work from his apartment near Century City. It was much more convenient—and healthy—to leave the car inside his underground garage.

When he first started working at Felden-Wysock in Texas, he was a lowly stock boy who used to dream about how sweet life would be once he worked himself up to the level of buyer. Now that he was one—in Beverly Hills, no less—it wasn't so sweet. It was a cutthroat, unstable and boring line of work. Worse, he detested Beverly Hills, West L.A., West Hollywood and all the snobbish people living there. Countless times, he dared himself to walk away and head back to Texas, but he knew that there were no available jobs, no friends to take him in.

As he saw it, there were only three ways to get back home, and all of them were long shots. He could win the lottery, find a lover who wanted to move to Texas, or take the plunge and try to revive his short-lived singing career. He wanted a lover, but he had no intention of settling for anything less than his ideal. He wanted to be a professional singer again, but he knew it was a risk; it would take months of vocalizing and scales to get his voice back to where it was when he sang in night clubs around Dallas.

Mark thought of Tom and felt a trifle of promise. Tom was the first real man he'd met in L.A., and he allowed himself to feel positive about the encounter. *Hey, fool, you'll look at all this differently after you start meeting some hunks and begin to have some good times.*

A car pulled up alongside, and he heard the short beep of its horn. It was Lieutenant Zeitler.

He walked to the car feeling both excited and fearful.

Jerry gestured for him to get in, which he did.

"Headed for work?" Jerry appeared very tired; he'd not shaved.

"Yeah. You going to give me a lift?"

"You can call your office from the station. Thornton was murdered last night." He glanced at Mark and immediately felt guilty about his abruptness.

Mark's face turned pale; a cool numbness enveloped his entire body.

"He had cigarette burns, so we can safely assume he was tortured. His address book is missing, too." He glanced at Mark again. "You did get a good look at him, didn't you?"

Tears began to stream down Mark's face as the heavy impact of guilt tore into him.

Mark sat quietly in Jerry's office, staring at a line of palm trees outside. Even as Jerry noisily entered with a

young police artist, Mark's attention wasn't diverted. Then he began to focus on a drawing in front of his eyes.

"This is one of four drawings we've done from descriptions we have of the killer," said Jerry. "Now what the artist is going to do is draw a platinum wig over a generic composite of the facial features from the other drawings, and you can help him refine it, okay?"

Mark nodded and watched as the thin, blond artist pulled out the generic version, which looked nothing like the man Mark had seen. The artist sat in a chair next to Mark as Jerry took the seat behind his desk.

"Okay, now describe the wig," said the artist. "You say he looked like a pro wrestler. Who? What kind of hair style?"

"Well, it was platinum and sort of thinned out on the forehead. I think it just barely hit his shoulders."

The artist went to work.

Jerry gazed out over the task force and found virtually every desk occupied. People he'd never seen before were making telephone calls and questioning witnesses. Ginger was now on the other side of the bull pen, supervising a group of clerks who were generating reams of computer printouts and other printed documents. It was like he'd gone back in time to when the Full Moon task force was in full swing. He noticed Mingus sitting at his desk, smoking yet another cigarette. His partner, Jake Cryder, was drinking from the water fountain just outside Jerry's office and was staring inside at what the artist was drawing. The young detective's metallic blue eyes were drawn to Jerry's cold stare, whereupon he nodded and slowly ambled toward Mingus.

The artist finished and showed the drawing to Mark.

"The hair's right, but the face isn't," Mark critiqued. "His lips were sort of fuller and his chin was more recessed. Yeah, and his eyebrows were a little thicker."

Jerry's telephone rang and he answered it, looking warily at all the stacked-up paper work on his desk. It was Captain Morton, who demanded his briefing for the day.

While Jerry filled Morton in on the day's activities, the artist quickly modified the drawing as Mark looked over his shoulder.

His briefing completed, Morton stayed on the line and reminded Jerry that he still had to take his vacation in spite of the Zooloo case. Although Jerry considered Morton rigidly bureaucratic and seemingly more concerned about personnel matters than catching a killer, he decided not to argue with the captain. Instead, he planned to direct the task force from Las Vegas through Finnigan and return on the next flight if anything turned up. As Morton droned on about politics at City Hall, Jerry allowed himself to become excited over the glimmer of progress. He knew that if he fed the data processing group a basic likeness, they could print out tens or even hundreds of full color composites showing the same face with every hair style, complexion, hair color and eye color imaginable.

Mark felt his hair tingle. "That's him."

Jerry's heart began to pound. "Hold on, Captain." He placed a hand over the receiver and looked at the artist. "Okay, get it to data processing downtown and get them on it. You know what to do."

"Yes, sir." The artist stuffed the drawing inside a large carrying case and rushed out of the office.

Jerry watched as the young man disappeared down the hallway, then noticed that virtually everyone in the bull pen had been watching also. "Yeah, Captain. We just finished the drawing and it's on its way." He held his hand on the receiver again as Morton went on and on. "You did good, Mister Graham," said Jerry, moving around the desk and sitting in the chair the artist had used. He leaned back and propped his feet upon his desk.

"Thanks." Mark felt his depression worsen.

Morton finally finished his conversation, and Jerry hung up the receiver.

Jerry could sense Mark's pain and felt sorry for him. "I'm assigning some live-in body guards to you, Mister Graham. May I suggest you forego the bars or wherever you go to do . . . whatever you do for awhile."

"I don't feel much like entertainment right now." Jerry's comment had infuriated him, but the crippling depression held his anger in check. "If it weren't for me, Tom would be alive now."

"You can cool it on the guilt. I had men watching both of you last night."

Mark wondered if Jerry had actually said it. "What?" It occurred to him that maybe Jerry was lying to make him feel better. "You're not just . . . "

"The officers assigned to Tom got a little sloppy, though, and one paid for it with his life. I knew you were lying."

"Oh, sweet Jesus," moaned Mark, burying his face in his hands. The surge of relief made him feel giddy, but it was short lived. He thought of Zooloo and knew that he was in terrible danger. "Sweet . . . oh, God . . . uh . . . maybe you should just slow down a little bit, okay?" Tears welled in his eyes out of a combination of helplessness, relief and grief. Knowing that he must have looked like a babbling idiot, he struggled to compose himself.

"The killer is no one to underestimate. He's brazen, and he's deadly as hell." Jerry wondered how close Mark was to the edge, but he had to probe. "Why did you lie, Mister Graham?"

Mark looked at him sheepishly, then lowered his gaze. "A friend of mine was murdered nearly four years ago . . . and the police made me miserable with all the line-ups and mug shots. I almost lost my job over it because they didn't give a shit if anyone found out I was gay. That and I got my ass kicked by cops during a raid on a bath once."

"Where was this?"

"Dallas."

Jerry smiled. "I thought I detected that God's Country accent. You a native?"

Mark smiled for the first time. "Yeah. You, too, huh?"

"Deep in the heart, my good man. Genuine Texas German from Bergheim."

Mark grinned but couldn't think of anything else to say.

"We're not like that here in my group," said Jerry at length. "You read me wrong last night. I wasn't making fun of you, really. I have nothing against gays or lesbians. As a matter of fact I have a lesbian and a gay man who are detectives—first grade, no less. You'll get to know them pretty well over the next few days, probably. They'll tell you that I'm a pretty nice guy." Jerry stood up and looked out over the task force. Mingus and his partner had left without signing out.

Free of the crippling feeling of guilt, Mark felt better equipped to handle the fear. He watched as Jerry pondered his next step. His initial attraction to Jerry resurfaced and he studied the lieutenant's features for the first time. He'd never noticed the clean, salt-and-pepper hair and green eyes, nor the huge arms and stout body. Suddenly, the sight of Jerry made him squirm.

Jerry yawned and stretched, oblivious to Mark's gaze at his crotch. "Well, I'd better assign someone to start you out. I don't dare use uniforms again." He thought of Morton which prompted him to mumble, "I'll probably get into trouble using task force detectives." He turned his attention back to Mark. "You want the gay one?"

"You trying to fix me up?"

"I only thought you wouldn't be as bored with someone of your own kind," Jerry said, slightly irritated.

"Straights don't bore me."

"Yeah, well you're pretty open about your . . . situation."

Mark bristled. "Situation?"

"I mean life style." Jerry hastened to correct himself. "Some of us get a little uptight if you flaunt it."

Mark was indignant. "Flaunt it? When have I flaunted it?"

"Last night," answered Jerry, sitting behind the desk again.

"Ahh, but that was different. Maybe you can walk in on something like that and not go to pieces, but that sort of thing never happened to us before. Tom and I were just trying to calm each other down." The shock over what happened to Tom merged with the remaining sense of irritation over Jerry's remark. "I'll have you know that no one I've ever worked with has ever figured out that I like men."

"Okay, okay," soothed Jerry. He found Mark's reaction amusing.

Jerry's unexpected sensitivity heightened Mark's attraction. "Can I say something to you in all honesty?"

Jerry looked at him curiously, nodding.

"I'm beginning to like you."

Jerry narrowed his eyes. "For Christ's sake, you acted like you hated me up until ten minutes ago."

"You're suddenly interesting."

Jerry became suspicious. "Interesting?"

"And sexy."

"*I* turn *you* on?" Jerry blushed, then burst out laughing.

"Just a little while ago. I don't know why, because, up until then, I thought you hated homosexuals. Maybe it was that mean look. You look like you have a cruel side, do you know that?"

Jerry was caught off guard. "No, I didn't know that. I'm actually a very affectionate and caring person to those who treat me the same way. I got a few enemies who think I'm pretty cruel, though. By the way, you're certainly not my type, Mister Graham."

"Mark."

"Why don't you drop the bullshit? I liked you better when you were guilt-ridden."

"It's not bullshit. You really turn me on."

Blushing again, Jerry spotted Anderson and abruptly left the office, returning with the handsome detective. "Mister Graham, this is Detective Anderson. He and two others are assigned to protect you."

"Mister Graham," said Anderson, nodding.

"Mark," corrected Mark. "*Mark*," he repeated louder for Jerry.

Jerry suppressed a laugh. "Make sure nothing happens to him, Anderson."

"You got it, Lieutenant." Anderson ushered Mark out of the office.

Jerry watched as Mark looked back once more, nodding earnestly. As the fellow Texan disappeared, Jerry turned around and stared out his window. He was flattered, yet anxious. He wondered if there was a common thread joining the dream, his phantom and Mark's attraction.

"Don't be silly," he mumbled to himself.

SEVEN

That Afternoon

Mark had insisted upon sending flowers to Thornton's funeral and doing some grocery shopping. While he was ordering the flowers from his neighborhood florist, Anderson stood on the curb outside, vigilantly looking up and down the street.

Mark took his receipt and stuffed it inside his wallet. Turning to leave, he noticed that Anderson had moved inside the flower shop and was standing in the doorway, gesturing for him to stay put. The florist, obviously sensing danger, slipped into a back room. Mark stood still, his eyes locked on Anderson in the doorway. Fearing the worst, Mark looked around for some sort of means of self-defense, finding only a brass vase holding eucalyptus branches.

A muscular young man with sunglasses slowly walked past the coiled detective and glanced into the shop, oblivious to the fact that Anderson's hand was grasping the handle of a pistol.

Mark shook his head. "Not him."

Relieved, they smiled at each other and continued on toward a grocery store another block away.

"Where is Thornton being buried?" asked Anderson.

"Boise, Idaho." He felt the heaviness of liquid building up around his eyes and fought it. "Anderson?"

The detective glanced at him for only an instant, then

continued scanning the immediate area. "Yeah?"

"Do you think he'll get me?"

"No," Anderson said casually.

"God, I hope nothing happens to you. I'd hate to live my life thinking I was a jinx."

"Don't worry, Mark." Anderson smiled. "If anything happens to me, the same thing will probably happen to you, too."

"Yeah . . . right," said Mark, trailing off.

"Look, Mark, this is my job. I sought this line of work and I'm paid well to do it. And I wish you would cool it with the jinx business."

They stood silently at an intersection, waiting for the signal to walk. Anderson poured over the area with sharp, wise eyes.

"Is that the supermarket you shop at?" The cop gestured with his head.

"Yeah."

"Too big. Is there a smaller one nearby?"

"Yeah, but it's more expensive."

Anderson gave him an impatient look.

"Okay, okay. The deli it is."

Sergeant Braidman, a short, portly man in his fifties, stuck his head into Jerry's office, looking over a pair of bifocals. "I'm going to grab a quick bite before the task force meeting, Jerry. Anything you want?"

"Are we all set on the Graham rotation?" asked Jerry, ignoring the question.

"Yeah. Anderson's got him eight to eight, then a squad car—Mooney and Jones—comes on outside for the night."

"Mooney and Jones?"

"They're from West L.A. Vice. They're slow over there, so they can spare them."

"They probably want to get rid of them," mumbled Jerry. "Isn't Anderson off tomorrow?"

"Yeah. They're trying to get him lined up with a cover job at Graham's place of work. His partner, Taylor, is taking the watch."

Jerry became lost in endless details.

"How about the lab report on the condom in number three?"

"Due any minute," said Braidman. "I left word to bring the report to our meeting."

Jerry turned to the stocky sergeant and shook his head. "Goddamn, you're efficient. How would you like to work here full time?"

"I'm retiring, Lieutenant." He smiled broadly. "I'm just counting the days before I get to move to Mexico with just the wife."

Jerry waved his hand in friendly dismissal and watched the sergeant rush to the desk Ginger had used.

For the next fifteen minutes, Jerry skimmed over the entire transcripts of each murder, including Tom Thornton's. He was terrified that the drawings would prove unsuccessful, sending them back to square one.

It was almost eight o'clock and Anderson prepared to go off duty.

Mark stood looking out his living room window. "Where are they?"

"The green Pontiac right in front," said Anderson, checking the locks on Mark's apartment door.

"Oh, yeah, I see them now. They don't look like cops."

"They're not supposed to." Anderson went into the kitchen and poured a glass of water.

"I wonder how long I'll have to live like this," said Mark, turning from the window.

Anderson shrugged his shoulders. "You taking all your vacation time?"

"What vacation time?"

"Well, they're working on a temporary cover job for me at your department store. Should know something by tomorrow. Maybe you can return to work in a couple of days."

"So I won't see you tomorrow?"

"No. My partner'll be here. His name's Taylor. Real people."

Mark nodded and sat heavily on the couch.

Anderson walked to the door. "Don't worry. Everything will turn out all right."

"You're going home to your lover now?"

"Sure am."

"Must be nice, going home to someone who loves you. I envy you."

"Don't. It'll come when you least expect it . . . from the person you least expect it from. Be patient."

"You're a great guy, man. Your lover is lucky as hell."

"Correction. *I'm* lucky." He smiled and winked. "Lock the door after me. If anyone tries to get inside, just throw something out the front window to alert the guys below. Throw a chair out if you have to. Only don't kill anyone below."

Mark got up and locked the door after him, then went to the window and watched as Anderson talked briefly with the detectives in the unmarked squad car. As he started to move away from the window, Anderson waved at someone across the street. The sight of Jerry caused Mark's heart to race.

"Hi," greeted Mark, opening the door for Jerry. "Come on in. Want a drink?"

Jerry looked around the room and walked to the bay window. "Dumb assholes. Right under the fucking window. Canadian or Scotch, if you got it."

"Anything new?" asked Mark, walking into the kitchen. He was pleasantly surprised that Jerry was going to stay for a drink.

"Nope." He sat on the couch in front of the window, inspecting the entrance door and the rest of the room. "No other entrances?"

"No."

"Another bay window in the bedroom? Just one

bedroom, right?"

"Right on both."

"How'd it go today?" asked Jerry, finally completing his inspection. "You two get along okay?"

Mark came with Jerry's drink. "Couple of jumpy moments with mistaken identity, but otherwise, fine. I'm very impressed with Anderson."

"He's one of the best."

Mark sat a respectable distance from him on the couch. "One of the best gay ones or one of the best?"

"One of the best, *period*. Give it a rest, Mark. It doesn't become you." Jerry took a gulp of his drink.

In spite of feeling embarrassed, Mark fought to keep a grin from forming. He became entranced by Jerry's features. He studied the texture of the lieutenant's lips and the cleanness of his mouth—something he'd never done with any other man. He allowed himself the fantasy of kissing Jerry and felt a surge in his cock. "Anything new?"

"I can't tell you anything," Jerry answered, still flattered yet uncomfortable with Mark's obvious attraction. Of course, he couldn't share the fact that the killer had shot his load into a rubber and pushed it into the third victim's rectum-less cavity with a broom handle in lieu of his penis. It was obvious to Jerry that the killer couldn't stand the idea of having sex with his victims. They were not dealing with a psychopath, Jerry was sure. But just what were they dealing with?

"Anderson said something about getting into the killer's head."

"Anderson's not supposed to talk about the case."

"Oh, no," said Mark, grimacing. "Did I get him in trouble?"

Mark's expression tickled Jerry and he attempted to hide another smile with his hand. "No."

"So how do you get into his head?"

"I don't know. I've always been afraid to get into a psycho's head. Once inside, maybe you can't get out again. Maybe it's like some maze, you know?" Jerry thought about it. "I guess I'm afraid to see whatever it is that allows them to kill so easily."

Mark abandoned an erotic fantasy about Jerry and contemplated what the lieutenant had said. "I never thought of that." The memory of the ice-blue eyes returned and caused Mark to tremble. "I've never felt this scared and lonely before."

Jerry watched him with a hint of paternal compassion. He *was* old enough to be Mark's father. He felt compelled to console him but didn't dare. *Mark, you are so fucking ripe—so incredibly vulnerable, emotionally and physically. If I show you any warmth at all, you'll flip for me and get hurt. And then there's Zooloo somewhere out there, and he's going to try to kill you. And he probably will.*

Jerry abruptly stood up to leave.

Mark instinctively reached out for him. "No! Please don't leave . . . " He turned crimson and quickly pulled his hands back. "I'm sorry. Jesus, I didn't mean to do that."

"Forget it," said Jerry, looking away in embarrassment.

Mark sighed and stared at the ceiling, angry at himself. "Bad habit. I always want to touch the ones who don't want me to."

Jerry felt very uncomfortable and pretended to ignore the remark. "I'd better move on." He placed the glass on the coffee table and walked to the door.

"Lieutenant . . . is it all right if I invite a friend over for the night? I don't want to be alone."

Jerry shook his head. "I hate to be a prick, but I'd rather you stay here alone. It makes it easier for everybody. Plus, I don't want you to discuss the case with anyone. If he calls, just put him off for a couple of days."

Mark nodded dejectedly and stared at the coffee table.

"Keep your chin up, Graham. Everything will be all right"

Mark didn't look up, so Jerry opened the door and left.

"Mark," he muttered softly. "Call me . . . Mark."

EIGHT

The Following Morning

Morning brought the frazzled nerves of troubled sleep. Every footfall from the hallway had awakened Mark and sent him into a chilling, paranoid seizure. Every creak had brought feelings of doom. Just before dawn, he finally got to sleep, but he was awakened less than an hour later by a nightmare which featured an attacking mandrill baboon with platinum hair, a red and blue face, ice-blue eyes and gleaming incisors.

As he crawled out of bed and into a robe, his back became raked by muscle spasms. "No pain. Jesus, no pain now," he grumbled through clenched teeth, then walked as naturally as possible to the living room window, hoping the spasms would cease.

The squad car's not there!

He cringed and jumped away from the window, then looked at the clock on the kitchen wall, which read 8:15. "Oh, my God," he whispered, wondering if he was still asleep and dreaming.

He heard slow, creaking footsteps outside in the hallway. The sounds stopped just in front of his door, then resumed and drifted away.

He slid down the wall into a sitting position on the floor and stared at the door.

Silence.

Finding his courage, he slowly got to his feet and carefully walked into the kitchen. Easing a drawer open, he pulled out an eight inch butcher knife and grasped it tightly. Hearing faster, more deliberate footsteps, he walked to the door and held the knife in front of him.

As the door buzzer sounded, he violently opened the door to the extent the door chain would allow, flashing the knife through the crack.

A very homely-looking man with a horrified look on his face fell against the opposite wall. "Jesus Christ, man!" he yelled, holding out his identification with one hand and

grasping his chest with the other.

"Oh, no," mumbled Mark, closing the door and unlatching the chain. "I'm sorry. You must be Taylor. God, I'm sorry."

Detective Taylor composed himself and entered the apartment laughing. "Something tells me you don't *need* protection." He held a hand radio, which he placed on a table near the entrance.

"What I need is a *shrink*," said Mark, closing the door and placing the knife on top of a stereo speaker. His hands shook violently.

"Sorry I'm late. Lieutenant Z would really be pissed if he found out."

"I won't tell him," said Mark, happy and relieved that he had company. He took a deep breath to compose himself.

"Those assholes outside were supposed to wait for me. Damned car wouldn't start this morning."

"No problem. You want some breakfast? I'm hungry." Mark heard the radio crackle as someone spoke incoherently. He wondered if the voice was Jerry's.

"Hey, breakfast. I didn't know this job had fringes. Too bad it's temporary."

As Mark cooked breakfast, he fantasized about what it would be like to cook breakfast for Jerry. While Taylor talked about his family and the adventures of being a homicide detective, Mark pretended to listen and allowed his fantasy to expand.

Mark and Jerry were throwing a brunch for friends in their new home on the beach in Malibu. Jerry was dressed in snug, white trousers and a green silk shirt which brought out the color of his dazzling eyes. The guests were all male couples with ten to twenty years of age separating them. They were rugged and masculine-looking, free of gay mannerisms. All the younger men—and many of the older ones, too—were staring hungrily at Jerry. Later, when all the guests had left, Mark and Jerry stood arm-in-arm on the terrace, watching the sun set over the Pacific.

When Mark returned to reality, he and Taylor were having breakfast. Taylor was impressed with the Eggs Benedict and praised Mark's cooking.

As Mark washed the dishes, he listened as Taylor described the current situation in his family. The wife was quite heavy but pleasant and easy to live with. Two teenage sons were into athletics and girls and seemed to be headed in the "right direction." His two adolescent daughters were beautiful, and one had an I.Q. of 168. Taylor's only serious problem seemed to be his habit of oversleeping and getting into trouble with Jerry because of it.

"You know, Mister Graham . . . "

"Mark."

"You know, Mark. I moved here from Iowa over twenty years ago, and I've never regretted it. I love this area. The kids love it, the wife, too. You got the mountains and the desert and the ocean . . . "

Mark abruptly got up from the table. "This robe is beginning to stink. I'd better get cleaned up. Feel like taking me to visit a friend? Zeitler says I shouldn't, but I got something on you. I won't tell if you won't." Mark smiled warmly.

"Ya got me." He chuckled. "Sure, why not."

Mark walked toward his bedroom. "I'll be ready in about thirty minutes. Help yourself to more coffee." He stopped and turned around. "By the way . . . did you walk by the front door a couple of minutes before you pushed the door buzzer?"

"No. I found the apartment right from the elevator."

"I heard footsteps before you came."

He shrugged. "I didn't see anyone."

Mark was puzzled and stared at the door. He shook his head, then went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Since it usually took over five minutes to get hot water, he laid out some clothes on the bed. As he was about to enter the bathroom, a soft knock came to the door and he watched as Taylor pulled his service revolver and cracked the door open.

"What are you doing here?" Taylor said, closing the door, unlatching the chain and opening it again.

A shiny blade sank into Taylor's chest, and he fell to the floor. Mark quickly moved out of sight, quietly slipping into a hall closet across from the bathroom. His heart pounded as adrenaline rushed through his body, taking away all reason and fear. He became an animal being stalked by its most effective predator.

He heard the door close, followed by soft footfalls over the living room carpet. There was a brief pause, then the footfalls resumed toward the hallway, stopping at the bathroom entrance. He heard the creaking of his bathroom door and the sound of the shower. Carefully, Mark opened the closet door and saw the backside of the man who wanted him dead. Without thinking about consequences, he violently pushed the door into the man, sending him through the bathroom doorway and into the glass door of the shower stall. As he heard shattering glass, he ran with all his strength for the entry way, grabbing the kitchen knife as he went through the door. He sprinted to the stairwell and down the stairs.

Mark stopped when he realized that no one was following him. Breathing heavily, he cocked his ear. "The elevator," he whispered to himself. Glancing at the number above the door on that landing, he realized that he was on the mezzanine level, where there was a meeting room. Remembering that there was a small toilet adjacent to the meeting room, he quietly opened the door and peered over a railing to the lobby below. As he slipped into the rest room, he heard the elevator door open below. Not turning on the light, he groped his way to the single stall and sat on the commode with his knees up under his chin. He tightly gripped the knife and rested his fist atop his knees, ready to strike out.

Void of the perceptions of time, sound and sight, his mind began to provide its own sensory perceptions. Even though his body was coiled to retaliate, his mind sought

something pleasurable, a means to escape.

It seemed like the Mojave, but he wasn't sure. It was definitely a desert floor, bathing in vivid moonlight. Silhouettes of Joshua trees were everywhere. He found himself running toward the sound of spirited hoof beats from beyond a rise. As he reached the top of the rise he saw the magnificent beast with a man's chest and head. The minotaur stopped and turned his massive torso toward Mark, who slowly walked toward the creature, careful not to frighten him. Mark looked into the beast's eyes, which were grey in the moonlight. Suddenly, a ray of sunlight streaked through a gap in the distant peaks and illuminated a ruddy face with green eyes. As Mark's gaze firmly locked on the eyes, he reached out to touch a large, rough hand which was tentatively reaching out for his.

"Jerry?" he whispered to the magnificent creature.

The minotaur kissed him, lifting him high in the air. Mark became enraptured as he felt himself being slung atop the powerful, sweaty back. Feeling powerful muscles tensing, Mark wrapped his arms around the minotaur's waist, then held on as powerful legs surged into a gallop, taking them toward a mountain on the horizon.

Suddenly, there was a blinding light and the sound of footsteps approaching the booth. Mark felt a surge of static electricity arc across his head, numbing his face. He dared not move or breathe. Slowly, the door opened with a creak and a familiar face looked down at him.

"In here! He's okay!" Jerry yelled to someone outside. Holding the door open wide, he fell against the tile wall with a huge sigh.

Mark avoided looking at the white body outline and pool of coagulated blood on the floor. He tearfully looked up into Jerry's eyes.

Jerry stared bitterly at the spot where Taylor had fallen. "He was able to radio in, but he died before he could tell us who did it."

Mark became nauseated. "His kids . . . he told me all about his family."

"Get dressed, Mark," said Jerry softly. "Better pack a suitcase." He shook his head forlornly. "Something's wrong here. Something just doesn't add up."

Jerry sat alone with Mark in his office, listening carefully to his account of what happened. The rest of the task force outside stared at the two men, some with tears in their eyes, others ashen with shock. Taylor had been well-liked and respected.

"He said, 'What are you doing here,' and then opened the door and this knife just . . . just ripped . . . oh, God, it just ripped into him. That's when I hid in the closet." Mark's lips were cracked and his face was still pale. He spoke in a monotone. "I never saw his face, but I knew it was him. Same build . . . muscular. That's when I pushed him into the shower glass. It shattered . . . I could hear it shatter as I ran."

"We have his blood sample now," said Jerry, "but we have to put you under wraps. Zooloo could be a cop."

"Where will you take me?" Mark could feel a clamminess creeping over him as he envisioned being jailed somewhere for his own protection.

"I'm taking you some place Zooloo wouldn't expect—nor anyone else for that matter."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you later," said Jerry, scanning his office for likely places to hide a listening device. "I don't trust this place."

"You mean it could be bugged?" asked Mark, incredulous.

"Taylor knew him," continued Jerry. "Mark, are you sure Taylor didn't call him by name?"

"I'm sure."

"There are too many people I don't know assigned to this task force," said Jerry. "And most of them incompetent like those two jokers I just got suspended—Mooney and Jones, the ones who left your building before Taylor got there."

Mark slowly turned and considered the faces of the task force.

"That's right, take a slow, careful look," Jerry murmured. "Recognize anyone?"

"No," answered Mark, crouching in his chair, shivering. "When do we get out of here?"

"Soon. We're waiting for the composite drawings," Jerry said, scanning the faces of the task force himself, trying to determine who was missing. "Finnigan and Reba are bringing them in from downtown any minute."

"What if the drawings don't turn up anything?"

Jerry continued gazing over the task force, intimidating several personnel into resuming their work. "Then we'll set a trap. He's too smart for a serial killer. Everything he's done was designed to make us think something else. The roles have been reversed. He's attacking *us* and we're reacting and running around in circles. And how much input was he responsible for? How many leads has he fed us to throw us off? Maybe he's *on* the goddamn task force!" He shivered as he became concerned over Finnigan and Reba's safety.

He made mental notes of those who weren't there: Kenzo, Steele, Santoro, Sosa, Braidman. Then Santoro and Sosa walked in. *Kenzo and Steele aren't white. Where is Mingus? There, there in the corner, smoking his ever-present cigarette, smiling at me and hoping I'll fall on my face. Where is his asshole partner, Cryder?* "Hell, the killer could even be one of the janitors, for crissake. Worse, he could be a goddamned suspect's lawyer with the security we have around this place!" *Where is Cryder?*

Jerry hastily buzzed Braidman outside.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he asked, looking through the glass.

"Sarge, could you do me a quick favor? Bring me the personnel records of all our entire department. And get me the records of every other task force member from other departments, too, okay?"

"You got it, Jerry," he said, rushing to a room on the other side of the bull pen.

Mark and Jerry became locked in each other's gaze. Mark knew that Jerry was the key to his survival. Jerry knew that Mark was the only key he had to solve the case. There was a renewed trust and a seemingly fated bond.

Finnigan and Reba burst through the double doors and rushed to Jerry's office, out of breath. "Here they are!" yelled Finnigan, his eyes wide with excitement.

Jerry pulled the composite drawings out of the artist's case and handed them to Mark. He glanced at Reba. "Could you tell Santo that I want to see her?"

"Sure," Reba said, turning to go.

"And Reba," Jerry added. "Could you and Sosa stay outside?"

Reba was taken aback.

"No offense, okay? Finn will explain to you later."

Finnigan appeared even more surprised as Reba left to get Santoro.

As Mark looked carefully at all the drawings, Santoro walked into the office and closed the door behind her.

"Sit down, you bums. Detectives Finnigan and Santoro, this is our prize, Mister Graham."

Mark glanced up briefly, then rapidly thumbed through the composites. Both Santoro and Finnigan seemed to understand that something was wrong and joined Jerry in nervously studying Mark's expression.

Mark slowly lowered the drawings. "These were based on one of the earlier descriptions . . . not mine. He drew more detail with my description." His face went slack. "Lieutenant, the artist gave them the wrong drawing."

Jerry shook his head in disbelief, then felt four consecutive, hard thumps in his chest. He felt clammy and reached inside his desk for his vial of Xanax.

"Jerry?" said Finnigan, glancing at Santoro. "Are you okay?"

Jerry took two tablets and washed them down with cold, rancid coffee. Ignoring Finnigan, he hurriedly dialed the number for the supervisor at technical services.

"Technical Services, Officer Tobias," a woman answered.

"This is Lieutenant Zeitler at the Hollywood/Wilshire Division, Homicide. Is Sergeant Lewis there?"

"No, Lieutenant, he isn't. Can I take a message? He'll be back in about an hour."

Jerry's panic eased somewhat as he realized that he wasn't having a heart attack. Suddenly he felt old and tired. "Have him call me, will you?"

"Is there something I can help you with? You *did* get the drawings, didn't you?"

Jerry sat up in his chair. "You worked on the drawings?"

"Yes, sir. Are they okay?"

"Tell me, Officer . . . ."

"Tobias."

"Tobias. Which drawing did the artist hand you guys?"

"Artist?"

Jerry stiffened. "Young guy, about twenty-three, four."

"But, Lieutenant . . . no one handed us anything. Several drawings were left on Sergeant Lewis' desk with a note."

Jerry almost dropped the telephone. "Oh, my God," he whispered.

"Is something wrong, Lieutenant?"

"The artist was supposed to hand deliver only *one* drawing and you were supposed to print out variations on that one drawing."

The officer was silent.

"When the sergeant gets back, have him call me." Jerry absently hung up, looking at the bewildered expressions on the faces of Mark, Santoro and Finnigan.

"Zooloo is a cop."

Both Finnigan and Santoro looked dumbfounded.

Jerry stared at Mingus, who returned his gaze with an expression Jerry had never seen before. *Worried? Concerned about what?* "The killer might be sitting out there somewhere."

The others followed Jerry's gaze to Mingus, who turned and went back to work.

"Since we've already lost two cops, you two are the only ones I'm going to trust with this. You might as well know that not even the captain knows about my plan. I'm going on that vacation tomorrow . . . but not really. Finnigan, you run the show like planned, but send all the others off on wild goose chases. You and Santoro will be the only ones actually working on the case. We're about to lure this piece of shit into a little trap."

The two detectives glanced at each other, then nodded at Jerry.

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Jerry's squad car sped up the Hollywood Freeway ramp with Finnigan's squad car directly behind. Half way up the ramp, Finnigan abruptly stopped his car at an angle, blocking the ramp.

Finnigan and Santoro watched to see who would attempt to get on the ramp. As the traffic light changed at the intersection near the ramp base, three cars entered the ramp; Finnigan placed the beacon light on the roof. One by one, the cars stopped.

"A woman in the first," said Santoro. "Two guys in the second and a couple in the third."

"Recognize anyone?" asked Finnigan.

"Bright day. Everyone's wearing sunglasses."

"Look." Finnigan's voice was tense. "That yellow Volkswagen parked at the corner. It wasn't there when we first blocked the ramp. It must have just pulled up."

"Make the tags?"

"Too much glare."

Suddenly, the Volkswagen's tires squealed as it sped away backwards until it was out of view.

Jerry stopped the car at a lookout point in Hollywood Hills. He got out of the car and walked to the precipice,

looking down at the hairpin curves below. Satisfied that they weren't being followed, he got back into the car and drove up the steep, winding road, past expensive homes and huge gates suggesting even more magnificent homes beyond the trees.

"Am I worth all this?" Mark asked, bewildered.

"Bet your ass."

"Well, it's evident that someone *has* bet my ass."

Jerry smiled. "Your ass is all I have if I'm going to solve this case."

"And afterward you get promoted, right?"

"Retirement."

"Then what?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . travel . . . build a home."

"May I ask where we're going?"

"To the place of an old friend who's in Europe for awhile. She owes me a favor and gave me the run of her house in case I wanted to impress someone."

"Is your wife joining us?" Mark asked coyly.

"I don't have a wife. It's just going to be the two of us."

"Oh, really?" Mark raised his eyebrows.

"You don't give up, do you?" groaned Jerry.

"Oh, come on. Do you really think I'm gross enough to try something?"

There was a period of tense silence.

"But it *is* sort of a shock to find that you're single." Mark turned his head away from Jerry and smiled.

"I wouldn't read any encouragement into that if I were you, Mark."

"I don't feel the least bit encouraged, I assure you," insisted Mark.

The two-story, reinforced concrete-and-glass house was shaped like a semicircle and rested upon a cleared lesser peak of the mountain. It was glistening white against a backdrop of stately eucalyptus trees. Royal palms lined the drive from the huge wrought iron gate up to the house. A redwood deck swept around the entire front curve of the house and extended out to the edge of a sheer cliff of solid rock. Except for the cliff side, the entire house and grounds were surrounded by a dense line of oleanders behind which was a tall chain-link fence with razor wire at the top. Jerry placed a card key into a slot at the entrance, and the gate creaked open. He drove up the driveway and parked behind the house adjacent to a four-car garage. The spot overlooked a pool and a garden filled with hundreds of varieties of succulents, along with several species of hibiscus, Bougainvillea and flowers of every color imaginable. A gardener was busy trimming hedges in the rear of the grounds.

"Good God!" Mark stepped out of the car and marvelled at the sight.

"Welcome to Cliff House." Jerry waved at the gardener, who was Japanese-American. "That's Sashi, the gardener. He's worked here for years."

"Who does this palace belong to?" asked Mark, entranced.

"The wife of a big Hollywood producer who was murdered about two years ago. Her name's Lydia Armani." Jerry led the way down to a side entrance. "Everybody thought she did it, and my boss tried to put the squeeze on us—probably because the D.A. was so anxious to pin in on someone easy. The victim's business partner did a frame job on the poor woman that you wouldn't believe, but I didn't buy it. Eventually, I stumbled over the evidence for the D.A. to go after the business partner. I ended up having an affair with her, but she wanted to 'keep' me." He smiled warmly. "Now, she's just a great friend who'll do anything for me."

Jerry fetched Mark's suitcase from the trunk and led him down to the side entrance. Using the same card key, he gained entrance to the kitchen, which was resplendent in highly polished brass and stainless steel utensils and shelves. There were racks filled with bottles of expensive wines and every modern convenience. Jerry led Mark into the cavernous, semicircular living room which rose through the second level. Several huge glass panels comprised a curved wall and offered a view of Los Angeles Mark had only seen in movies. To the left of the living room there was a formal dining area, which looked out over the pool in back. In the center of the house was an elevated indoor spa, which likewise overlooked the pool. Between the spa and the living room was a large, well-stocked wet bar made of glass, mirrors and stainless steel.

Jerry pointed toward a pie-shaped bedroom at the far end, adjacent to the front deck. "That's your bedroom. Knowing Lydia, it's probably stocked with robes and towels and all kinds of fancy stuff. It has its own bathroom." He pointed at another pie-shaped room next to the bedroom. "That's the entertainment room, which is loaded with state-of-the-art sound and video equipment. It has every video, CD and cassette tape ever made, I swear."

Mark looked up the stairway and saw a bedroom directly over the one on the first level.

"Upstairs is the master bedroom and another guest bedroom." Jerry gestured toward the spa. "Also has a study and a gym directly over the spa and dining area."

Mark looked at the redwood deck and walked toward the sliding glass door.

"I'll show you that later. She's got an elaborate security system, so we have to disarm it before we can go out on the deck or to the pool. Why don't you clean up while I take care of a little business, okay?"

Jerry walked up the stairs and made a telephone call to his drinking buddy and Internal Affairs source, Lieutenant Ross. Reaching Ross on his car phone, he merely asked the lieutenant to call him back and gave Lydia's number. Knowing that Ross would detect the urgency, he waited for the call from some phone booth. It came in less than three minutes.

"Hey, you ugly motherfucker!" greeted Ross. "Wanna meet me tonight at the Pussy Palace?"

"Naw, can't make it, Ross," said Jerry, wishing he could. He needed a drunken night out on the town with

someone crazy like Ross. "I got trouble, man . . . real trouble."

"Uh oh. Caiazza?"

"Zooloo is a cop, but I think Caiazza's involved."

"Say what?" Ross laughed.

"I need that surveillance apartment south of downtown and a van with a video camera."

"Oh, shit."

"Come on, Ross," said Jerry, sensing a turn down. "Caiazza's cocky now. He's vulnerable to making a mistake. It could be all you guys need to nail him."

"Things aren't the same here, Jerry. Caiazza's got everyone spooked. They did a witch hunt and got rid of a lot of guys, Jer. Most everyone who'd worked on his investigation. I still don't know how they missed me, but I'm not gonna push my luck by going out on a limb for you."

"Who'll know?" Jerry was feeling desperate. "Just you and me . . . and the van man won't have to know anything. All he has to do is work the video camera and give you the footage. Doesn't some rookie owe you a favor? I'll go with you to the D.A. Once it's in their hands, you can go back to being invisible."

"My source at the FBI tells me that Caiazza's not tied to the Mafia like we thought. It's worse, if you can believe that. They say he's involved with some white supremacy group in Idaho, and he has lots of friends in high places. They think he's stashing away explosives, but they don't know where. The guy points a finger at you, you're history, Jerry. He's one bad motherfucker."

"Explosives? What the hell for?"

"That's all my FBI source will tell me, other than it's big and they're getting nowhere."

"The more reason to do this then, Ross. He's got to be stopped, and I have his soft underbelly in my hands right now. How about it?"

Ross was silent.

"Come on, man. The cocksucker'll end up tearing the L.A.P.D. to pieces. Someone has to stop him, for God's sake."

"Okay . . . but you owe me, man. You owe me one hell of a big one."

"You got it, Ross. Thanks." Jerry hung up and quickly dialed the number of the station.

While Jerry was on the telephone, Mark had shaved, showered and slipped into a luxurious white silk bathrobe. Exploring the lower level of the house, he felt a warmth being there with Jerry He heard the sound of a car engine and looked out to see the gardener drive away.

As he made himself a Scotch and water at the bar, Jerry came down the stairs, shaking his head forlornly.

"What's wrong?" asked Mark, offering Jerry his drink.

Jerry absently took it. "The hair and blood samples are missing. First the drawings and now the other evidence." Jerry took a long sip from the drink and sat on an ottoman. "We're almost wiped out. We have to trap him now. Or should I say *them?*" He looked up at Mark thoughtfully. "Don't let *anyone* in this house, you understand?"

Mark nodded.

"I can't see how anyone would know you're here, but, just in case, all you have to do is hide and wait for help to arrive. Like I said, this place is hooked up to a fool-proof security system, so don't try to go outside, not even on to the deck. You'll set it off and have a hell of a time explaining to the local police why you're here." He gulped down the drink and rushed toward the kitchen. "I'll be back in about two or three hours."

"Where are you going?" Mark felt panicky.

"To set up a trap." Jerry waved and strode toward the kitchen exit. "Just be calm and enjoy yourself. You'll be all right." He pressed an interrupt button to allow him to get outside without setting off the alarm.

Mark watched as Jerry rushed to the squad car and sped down the road. He felt a strange tugging sensation in his stomach.

NINE

That Night

The apartment was located south of downtown. It was one of several rented by the L.A.P.D. to conduct sting operations and to stake out high crime areas.

Santoro sat at the window overlooking the street below. Irritated, she glanced at her watch. "Finnigan's late, and I haven't eaten since this morning. That asshole."

Jerry, now mellowed by a combination of Xanax and the Scotch, chuckled and looked up from the stack of files on the dining room table. "He probably ate a hero there so he could have a second one here. Then he could avoid your teasing him about his weight."

"I don't tease him about his weight," denied Santoro innocently.

"The hell you don't: 'Here comes Detective Finnigan. Give him two barstools,' and 'You're so big that I feel insignificant around you.'"

Santoro blushed and grinned.

"Hell, you love him more than his wife does," Jerry charged.

Santoro walked to the table and picked up a file, sitting down. "Jesus, *Mingus* loves him more than *that* fucking scorpion."

"*Read*, Santo," ordered Jerry. "Be patient and read."

The apartment was bare except for a couch and cheap dining room set, surrounded by four mismatched chairs. The appliances in the kitchen worked, but they were filthy.

Santoro looked around the apartment and noticed a cockroach climbing the wall. She pulled out her .357 Magnum service revolver and pretended to shoot it. "Boom, you slimy motherfucker. God, I hate cockroaches!"

Jerry glanced up and frowned. "Read, goddamnit."

She placed the pistol back inside a shoulder holster and picked up the files on Kenzo and his black partner, Steele. "Mister Moto and King Kong." She chuckled. "I don't think so." She stacked them inside a box at Jerry's

feet and reached for another. "Reba Martin. Umm. You know I'd like to get some of that."

Jerry shook his head and smiled. "You and everyone else. You know what makes her so attractive, don't you?"

"Yeah. She's not available to anyone except her husband." Santoro threw the file inside the box. "You ever meet him?"

"No."

"Neither have I. He's the biggest secret in the department."

A car door slammed on the street below and Santoro went to investigate. "Get up here with that, fool!" she shouted. Suddenly she turned and looked wide-eyed at Jerry. "You know what that idiot just did? He flashed his dick at me, right there on the street."

Jerry leaned back and smiled at Santoro, clearing away some files to make room for the arriving food.

As Finnigan noisily walked up the stairway, Santoro glanced up and down the street from the window. Turning to open the door for Finnigan, her face changed expression and she looked out the window again.

"See something?" asked Jerry.

"A glimpse of a yellow Volkswagen at the corner, but it's gone now."

"The same one you saw from the ramp?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." She walked to the door and opened it for Finnigan, who carried a large bag.

"You should be ashamed," she reprimanded. "Did anyone see you take your dick out?"

Finnigan laughed. "The hero joint was fresh out of *arroz con pollo* and *frijoles negros.*" He winked at Jerry. "Guess you'll have to eat American food."

"Did you make sure Mingus heard you when you hinted that Graham was here?" asked Jerry.

"Yeah. Everyone will know in a matter of an hour."

"I hope you got jalapeño peppers for my sandwich, you whore." Santoro grabbed the bag and looked inside. "Enough to feed an army in here." She carried the bag into the kitchen and emptied it on the counter.

"Got to make it look like it's enough for four, right Lieutenant?" said Finnigan, sitting at the table and picking up the file of Detective Taylor. Reading the label, he turned pale and dropped it, the paleness soon replaced by a look of anger.

Jerry noticed and picked up the file, placing it inside the box.

Santoro brought the food over and spread it out on the flattened bag, then went back for the cans of soda.

"Anything happen?" Finnigan asked, looking around the apartment.

"I thought I saw a yellow Volkswagen, but I didn't get a solid look." Santoro brought the sodas and began devouring a sandwich.

"I guess our lovable Deputy Chief Caiazza is really pissed off." Finnigan chomped off a huge piece of sandwich.

"Oh, yeah?" Jerry smelled his sandwich and put it down, opting for a drink of soda.

"Yeah. Braidman said that Caiazza's called your office about ten times. So has Captain Morton."

"That Caiazza's really got a hard on for you, Jerry," observed Santoro. "What is it? He didn't want you to go on vacation, and he's pissed that Morton allowed you to go?"

"Nah, he's pissed that we've boxed out his buddy, Mingus." Jerry washed down a tentative bite of sandwich with a gulp of Diet Coke. "I'm going to be up front with you guys, okay?"

Finnigan and Santoro gave him their attention.

"I don't believe Zooloo is a serial killer cop. I think these are hate crimes, terrorism . . . done by cops, *plural*. I talked to a source of mine at Internal Affairs awhile ago. All along, I thought that Caiazza was being investigated by the FBI for his Mafia ties, but I was wrong. It's his connection with a white supremacy group out of Idaho. Mingus is involved with it, too, I think, along with Cryder."

Finnigan's face took on a doubting expression. "Mingus? Jerry, are you saying that Mingus had something to do with these killings?"

Santoro shook her head in confusion. "Uhh, I think I took a wrong turn there. What does something like that have to do with our killer?"

"Just plain old terrorism, Santo," explained Jerry. "Let's try out motives here. A brutal, gay serial killer who starts out murdering leather freaks, then maybe he graduates to young boys when the public gets all frenzied-up. Add that on top of an already deteriorating public view of homosexuals in light of AIDS and all this radical activism shit. My source says that the FBI's uncovered some plots to bomb gay bars and baths. Plus, these creeps want to discredit me and any other commander who is liberal toward homosexuals—hell, Mingus has a *personal* reason to go for my throat since I beat him out of the lieutenant spot. They want to stir up trouble, and they have enough hate in their systems to carry out these types of murders." Jerry studied each detective's face to see if they were with him.

They weren't.

"Okay," Jerry continued. "The killer goes with this M.O. and it really doesn't deviate until after I point out the absence of the killer's semen. Mingus is there. He hears it. The next murder, the killer lamely jacks off in a rubber and pokes it into what used to be the guys cavity with a broom handle. Luckily the lab found traces of paint on the condom and traces of semen, shit and blood on the handle. The drawings get fucked up, the hair and semen samples are missing, the *artist* is now missing. Kill the only witness—Graham—and there's no case. This is NOT a serial killer cop."

Santoro slowly took another bite from her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. She glanced at Finnigan, then at Jerry. "If that's true, then why are we looking at these files?"

"I wanted to go through Mingus and Cryder's files

again anyway—to see if they had any connection. Otherwise, to keep Mingus thinking that we're looking for a psycho cop." Jerry prepared to take another bite, but threw the sandwich down. "I got to get moving. Okay, you guys, listen up. There's a stakeout van across the street with an Internal Affairs guy inside. The guy in the van is taking photos of anyone who shows an interest in what's going on up here. Now, I want you, Finn, to take the files back right after I leave. I'm going to drive home and pack and head for Burbank Airport, like I'm flying to Vegas. Santo, you leave by the alley route I told you about. Leave your car parked where it is and take a cab to your girl friend's house for the night."

"But why don't I just stay here and arrest whoever comes through the door?" argued Santoro.

"I think we're dealing with several people, Santo," said Jerry softly. "I don't want to get you killed. If they come up, the guy in the van will record it for us." He began stacking all the files inside the box.

"Then what?" asked Finnigan, looking troubled.

"Internal Affairs takes photos of Mingus and Cryder as they drive by and send one of their skin heads—probably the guy who drives the yellow Volkswagen—to come up and kill Graham. I.A. gets with the D.A., who takes the photos and other evidence to the judge and gets search warrants, then I.A. converges on Mingus and Cryder, who plea bargain to help convict Caiazza for conspiracy." Jerry downed his soda and turned to leave. He made a "V" with his fingers, chuckling at the sight of the stunned expressions on the detectives' faces. But as he touched the door knob, he realized that he saw something else. He turned. "What?"

Finnigan glanced at Santoro and cleared his throat. "You say both the state and feds are going after Caiazza and they haven't got anything yet? How big is this, Jerry? What happens to us if it backfires?"

"Backfires?" Jerry shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "What backfire? You telling me you're afraid to do this?" He studied Finnigan, then turned to Santoro.

Santoro looked at Jerry as though she also had serious reservations.

"Santo?" prodded Jerry.

"Uhh . . . ." She looked nervously at Finnigan. "Why isn't Internal Affairs doing the sting instead of us?"

"Yeah, Jerry," Finnigan said calmly, "This doesn't add up. Why isn't I.A. handling it?"

Jerry sighed. "I can't lie to you guys." His heart seemed to skip a couple of beats and he instinctively reached inside his shirt pocket for a tranquilizer. He swallowed two pills and walked to the table to take a sip of soft drink. "Only one guy at I.A. knows about this," he said, returning to the door. "It's just him and me and the D.A., provided they go along with our evidence." Frustrated, Jerry suddenly punched the door, cracking it."

Finnigan's face reddened in what Jerry assumed was a blend of anger and embarrassment. "Jerry, you know I'm loyal to you, but this could be suicide. You've put our lives at risk, my friend."

Santoro looked down.

"I see," said Jerry, crestfallen. "How silly of me to think you were a cop who's used to taking risks."

"Come on, Jerry," coaxed Santoro.

"Just go back to headquarters and pretend that I flew to Vegas. You don't know shit otherwise. Tell them that I brought you up to look at files and we struck out and you don't know where the witness is, that you think I'm fucking nuts!"

"Jerry, listen to yourself," pleaded Finnigan. "It's no good, buddy. It's insane!"

"Fuck you." Jerry walked out and slammed the door.

Jerry noticed that he was being followed by two alternating cars, each with one driver. He was convinced that they weren't cops because of their amateur approach to surveillance. Without trying to lose the two other cars, he drove to his apartment and found a pair of binoculars in the darkness. He studied both drivers as they waited in their cars on the street. Both were in their early twenties and had shaved heads. After getting a good look at them, Jerry turned on the lights and packed for a five day vacation.

Arriving at Burbank Airport, he was half a mile ahead of the nearest skinhead and imagined the young man's panic. He parked the squad car in a parking lot and watched as one skinhead parked illegally in the lot and the other parked illegally in front of the terminal. Jerry looked askance at the driver in front of the terminal and saw the face of a frightened, warped young man.

Certain that the two men had orders to make sure he went on vacation, Jerry bought a round trip ticket to Las Vegas and walked to the waiting area for the next flight. Positioning themselves several yards away from him on either side of the gate, Jerry realized that he would have to fly to Las Vegas. He had to be free to move about in L.A. and couldn't afford to have half of the Neo-Nazi Party looking for him. He had to convince them that he was actually taking a vacation.

TEN

Four Hours Later

By the time Jerry had returned to Burbank and rented a car, it was almost midnight. He was concerned that Mark might have panicked and made a call . . . or worse.

Jerry found Mark asleep on a couch in the darkened living room. "Mark?"

Mark opened his eyes and jumped up to a sitting position. "Huh?" He looked around wildly.

"Easy," soothed Jerry. "It's only me." He turned on a lamp nearby.

"Oh, fuck, I was dreaming about being chased by that Zooloo creep." He rubbed his eyes, looking at Jerry's suitcase.

"Did you eat?"

"Yeah, I had a sandwich a couple of hours ago." He looked at his watch. "Lord, how long were you gone?"

"About six hours," Jerry said, pouring himself a brandy at the bar. "You feel like drinking with me?"

Mark yawned. "Sure. Let's talk all night. Anything to quell these nightmares."

Jerry smiled and poured another drink. Handing one of the snifters to Mark, he sat in an overstuffed chair across from the younger man. It was obvious that he was wired and needed to mellow.

"So?"

"So what?"

"How did it go?"

Jerry shrugged. "We have it in the bag," he lied.

After Jerry failed to provide more details, Mark realized that he should leave the subject alone.

"After this brandy, I'm going to have a nice hot shower and go to bed." Jerry glanced at Mark, who smiled coyly. "In separate bedrooms," he added.

Mark snapped his fingers in an "Aw shucks" gesture, then laughed.

Jerry studied him. "I can't get over how relaxed you are all of a sudden. Hell, I thought you were going to have a nervous breakdown when I left."

"I feel at home here. It's nice and cozy . . . and you're here."

Jerry was beginning to feel less self-conscious about Mark's attraction. "Do you have a father?"

"Here we go with the father complex bit."

"I *know* why you're attracted to me. I asked you if you had a father."

"No. He died when I was seven."

"And your mother?"

"She died about three years ago."

"How about brothers and sisters?"

"A sister back home in Texas. A fire-and-brimstone type, complete with the AIDS-is-God's-punishment rhetoric. And a brother with a construction company in Phoenix. He doesn't care too much for me either."

"How'd they find out?" asked Jerry, becoming relaxed himself.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I got all caught up in this liberation shit before it became fashionable. I was one of the original coming-out proponents. I truly believed that if all gays and lesbians came out at the same time, the straight world would be so impressed by the numbers that they'd accept us." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Boy was I mistaken. It turned a perfectly harmonious family inside out. It almost killed my mother—the guilt scene and the where-did-I-go-wrong-as-a-mother syndrome."

"They had no idea before?"

"No. After my true confessions, my brother and sister convinced Mom that I needed psychiatric help. When I wasn't cooperative, Mom cut off the funds for college and wrote me out of her will and insurance. I tried to make it by working, but I couldn't make ends meet. I only got through three years at SMU."

"Nice family."

"I never went back, but I wrote to Mom about twice a year, letting her know where I was. Mostly, it was to leave the door open." Mark yawned, now fully awake.

"She never wrote to you?" Jerry was amazed.

"No." Mark smiled wanly. "Then my sister wrote me that Mom had died. I called her up and asked her why I'd not been contacted when it happened. She gave some lame excuse, like she'd just found my latest address only recently by digging through Mom's things. I hung up and from that day on I had no family."

"SMU, huh? What was your major?"

"Music."

"Music? What did you play?"

"Myself. I was a voice major."

"A singer? What, opera?"

"I couldn't handle opera. My voice is too lyric. I had no head or real power. Do you like opera?"

Jerry snuggled into his chair and smiled. "I'm a Puccini addict and I love Strauss. That's the German in me, I guess."

"You don't look like an opera nut."

"I'm not, really. Can't stand Verdi or Mozart or any of those other guys . . . just Puccini and Strauss."

"You must be a romantic."

"Probably. When I like something, I never get tired of it."

Mark fantasized undressing him. "What's your favorite song—other than opera?"

"Let's see . . . .'If Ever I See You Again.' Roberta Flack recorded it back in the seventies. Also, 'And I Love You So,' the way Perry Como sang it. Will you sing it for me someday?"

"Sure. I wrote a couple of songs, too—not as good as 'And I Love You So,' though."

"That song makes me starry-eyed and mushy."

"Does it remind you of someone?"

The far-away look returned. "Yeah. It reminds me of Jo, my wife. The way it should have been but wasn't."

Mark felt acutely depressed as he was reminded of Jerry's heterosexuality.

"Had Jo not died, we'd probably still be married to each other . . . and miserable. Funny thing about fate. Things happen and your life changes for better or worse and you're totally helpless. Me and Jo. You and your mother. And your life is completely shattered by intolerance."

"Yeah," said Mark, sipping his brandy. "I've been alone ever since. Just running around in circles, trying to find the right guy. My longest *relationship* lasted six months. You can imagine what the armchair psychiatrists make of that."

"It's so hard to believe. You're a good-looking man. To me, you shouldn't have any trouble finding what you want."

Mark chuckled bitterly. "If only I could be turned on to the young ones who're turned on to me. But I'm stuck with my type, which usually turns out to be married . . . or crazy or a raving drunk. The ones who aren't fucked-up usually prefer women . . . or any other guy besides me."

"What's your type?"

Mark smiled. "Look in the mirror."

For the first time, Jerry allowed himself to feel flattered.

"I suppose I need a father figure, but it goes deeper. Anatomically speaking, I like what I call a mellowed endo-mesomorph."

"What the hell is that?"

Mark was amused by the exaggerated frown on Jerry's face. "It's simply an older man who's stocky or burly."

"Strange type."

"Well, I've just described millions of men, and I'll bet most of them have someone who loves them."

"True, but they were probably young and thinner when they met the one who loves them. I doubt if very many people turn on to fat old men like me."

"You, a *fat old man*?" Mark conjured a look of awe. "Is that what you see when you look in the mirror?"

"Yeah. What do you see?"

Mark thought for a moment. "I see a cross between Rocky Marciano . . . "

"A *heavier, older* Rocky Marciano. Everyone tells me I look like Marciano."

" . . . and some dark-complexioned Aldo Ray, God rest his soul, and perhaps a pinch of Barry Corbin, Ed Asner and Bob Hoskins. You'd shit if you knew just how many men would jump at a chance to have someone like you."

"You're brain's on the moon, son."

"Bottom line: all it takes is one," said Mark seriously.

Jerry nodded in agreement, then took a sip of brandy.

"Oh, I had a few affairs when I was younger, but they were disastrous," continued Mark. "There was John in New York, until I found out that he liked eleven-year-old boys when he got drunk. Then, there was Tony in Chicago. Big guy like you, but he was so fucking guilt-ridden over having sex with me. Hell, he didn't even reciprocate and he *still* couldn't wait to get to confession." The memory gave Mark a pained look. "Then one day he got a little drunk and went down on me in the heat of passion. Next morning, when it all came back, he went off the deep end. I never saw him again."

"Jesus," mumbled Jerry, trying to sound supportive in spite of an acute feeling of very disturbing *deja vu*.

"Next thing I heard," continued Mark, "he was studying to be a Catholic deacon." He laughed bitterly. "There were others that never really got off the ground—the married ones who wanted me to be readily available and demanded keys to my apartment. I was such a naive fool until . . . until I finally just backed off and stopped looking. I guess I just went into some kind of self-imposed isolation to get my head on straight." He paused, looking into his drink. "Now, I'm learning how to respect and like myself. You might find this hard to believe, but I've resigned myself to living alone. Just me and my recurring dream. But then that's better than nothing, isn't it?"

"You have repeat dreams? What about?" Jerry was fascinated.

Mark felt reluctant to tell him. "It's too crazy."

"What is it? Out-of-body stuff? Wet dreams?" Jerry prodded, wondering if Mark's dreams were as bizarre as his own.

Mark grinned. "Wet . . . . That's what I mean when I say it's better than nothing."

"Who are they about?"

Jerry's sincere interest surprised him and spurred him on. "A minotaur—half man and half bull. Not the one with a man's body and a bull's head; the other way around. He always offers me a ride, and we ride off together in the moonlight."

Jerry couldn't suppress a chuckle. "I'm not making fun of you, but it's just that . . . . Wet dream? Have you ever seen a bull's cock?"

Mark smiled. "In the dream I never see his cock. I always cum as we reach full speed and I have my arms locked around his chest. I never remember his face either."

Jerry squirmed at the similarity to his own phantom. It flashed in his mind that perhaps he had met his alter ego. He felt as if he should take Mark more seriously. "What's the symbolism? Have any idea?" He wished he had the guts to share his own intimate dreams and fantasies.

Mark shook his head. "I never really thought of what it might mean. Now that you mention it, I guess it might mean that I'm looking for too much of an ideal. Something that exists only in my mind."

Jerry realized that he had been hanging on to Mark's every word and was amazed that he was allowing another man to get so close to him. As Jerry considered that he too might be looking for too much of an ideal, he became aware of a strong paternal attraction toward Mark.

"It happened again when Taylor was killed and I hid in that john," said Mark. "Hallucination?" He shrugged. "It had a face that time." He looked down. "Yours."

Jerry's face flushed. "But that's a different situation. You had a close call, son, and you were probably hoping like hell I'd show up."

"Probably." Mark took a sip of brandy and let it slowly trickle down his throat.

Jerry grinned, his face flushing more. "You didn't . . . uhh . . . "

"Cum?" Mark returned the grin. "You snapped me out of it too fast."

Jerry felt uneasy and regretted his question. *Shit, why would I care if something like that had happened?* "Being gay isn't really too gay, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . I've met a lot of people who're very happy being gay. I'd say the prospects are no different with you straights. Maybe someday I'll get lucky

and find the right guy."

"Maybe you will . . . I hope you do. You seem like a pretty decent guy."

"Now, how do you know that?"

Jerry pondered an answer. "Maybe it's because you're so open and honest. I admire that, but you might be leaving yourself open for every creep that comes along."

"You're pretty nice yourself—not at all like I thought you were at first."

"But I don't leave myself as open as you do. Don't get me wrong—I'm vulnerable, too."

"You? *Vulnerable?*"

"Yes. Vulnerable," said Jerry, amazed at his own frankness. "I live alone, eat microwaveable entrées and hate every minute of it. I'm a workaholic, probably an alcoholic, too. I have high blood pressure, an irregular heartbeat caused by stress, and borderline diabetes . . . ."

"Where's the vulnerability?" challenged Mark.

"The loneliness." Jerry had never before admitted his loneliness to anyone, and the statement felt strange coming from his mouth. "Loneliness at my age can kill you."

Mark was stunned into silence and almost moved to tears. "I never realized that before," he managed to say. "I just assumed you had a girl friend or family, children."

"I have two daughters who never speak to me."

"In L.A.?" Mark was even more stunned.

"One's a holy roller and the other's a fucked-up junkie." Jerry's gaze fell to the floor and his expression darkened bitterly. "I don't have any contact with them." He looked up at Mark and saw a person who really wanted to know him. Suddenly he had the urge to tell about the side of his life he never talked about.

"Why?" Mark's eyes began to mist over.

"Why?"

"Yes. Share it with me, Jerry. At least give me that much. Quid pro quo, okay? A piece of my soul in return for a piece of yours."

Jerry became enchanted with Mark's sincerity. It was refreshing in light of the type of work he did and the contacts he had with people like Mingus and Caiazza. "Well, where do I start? I met and married the former Jo Ann Nugent while we were freshmen at U.T. in Austin in . . . fifty . . . fifty-four. And, against my better judgment, I agreed to our both quitting school and moving to Los Angeles. She wanted to pursue an acting career because some drama instructor convinced her that she had great potential. Well, Jo was a very pretty young woman, but she couldn't act. Consequently, the only work she could find was as an extra. She did have some success as a model and singer, but she never got over the fact that Hollywood stardom had eluded her. Later, after Linda was born in fifty-seven, Jo got a job with a talent agency and eventually became an agent for a handful of lesser actors. I was working as a carpenter for Universal. She seemed happy to me, especially when Laura came along in fifty-eight. It wasn't until Laura was almost eight and I was five years into a career with L.A.P.D., when I realized that Jo had developed a drinking problem. By that time, Jo's personality had changed and she became surly and brooding. Unfortunately, I didn't see it coming." His mouth became dry and he tried in vain to swallow. "Jo took an overdose of sleeping pills in sixty-eight and died while the girls and I were visiting my folks in Texas.

"Had I not been saddled with all that additional responsibility . . . you know, being a mother to the girls and all. Hell, I would have become a deputy chief. But I took the responsibility seriously. I was there all the way for them and made sure they were brought up properly. I never married again, but I hired a series of nannies to stay with them until they went off on their own. Both of them have since had marriage problems and drug problems and God knows what else. They were always coming back to get under Daddy's umbrella until I put my foot down and told them they were on their own. Like I said, Laura's a religious fanatic now and thinks I'm the son of Satan. Linda's in and out of trouble with alcohol and drugs. I think you can say that we're pretty much estranged."

Mark studied him for several seconds then said exactly the opposite of what Jerry had anticipated: "I like that after-shave you wear."

Jerry was relieved that the seriousness had passed, that his dark secrets were out on the table to share with his new buddy. "Oh yeah?" said Jerry, wanting to know what made Mark tick but terrified of the cost of finding out.

"It makes me want to snuggle up next to you like a puppy."

Jerry became embarrassed. "I think we'd better turn in. Busy day tomorrow. I'm going to take a shower."

"I'll just sit here and watch the lights and sip my brandy . . . and try to figure out what that after-shave is."

"You're crazy, son, you know that?" Jerry got up and walked upstairs to the master bedroom. At the top of the stairs, he turned and said: "Polo."

Mark thought of earlier times when his father had called him "son." Said by the right man, it was a soothing term of endearment. He wondered what it would feel like to be loved by a man like Jerry. He captured the memory of Jerry's vocal resonance and willed it to say, "I love you, son." He played over and over in his mind, instilling in him a feeling of peace and contentment.

As the delusion drifted away and was replaced by cold reality, he inhaled the fumes from his brandy and looked out over Hollywood and the rest of Los Angeles. Surprisingly, he didn't feel frustrated over the unrequited lust he felt for the lieutenant. He knew he couldn't seduce Jerry in a conventional way. He surmised that the only possible way to get to Jerry was to earn his respect. If any seduction was to take place, it would have to be accomplished by doing just the opposite of what Jerry anticipated. "Just the opposite of what he anticipates," he whispered to himself.

He poured another glass of brandy and sipped it while

standing at the bar. He heard Jerry's heavy bare footsteps moving from the bedroom to the bath; then he heard the shower.

An alien feeling took hold of him, and at first he attributed it to the alcohol. Taking a gulp of brandy, he began ascending the stairs as if someone was prodding from behind. He felt out of control and somehow compelled to discount consequences. "I'm almost forty and life is too short. There are very few windows of opportunity available to me any more," he chanted to himself.

Mark stood in the bathroom doorway and stared at Jerry's silhouette, allowing his robe to drop to the floor. Placing the brandy snifter on the vanity, he approached the stall and opened the glass door.

Jerry was astonished at the sight of Mark but absently continued lathering his thick chest hair with soap. "No, Mark."

Mark lovingly poured over the burly, hairy body as water shot past him onto the floor. He extended a shaky hand to touch Jerry's chest.

"Don't make me hurt you, son. Back off," warned Jerry.

No, it won't work, Jerry. "Son" is a term of endearment and you won't hurt your son. "I can't help it, Jerry," Mark said softly, his voice quavering as his body shuddered.

"Get the hell out!" yelled Jerry, pushing Mark back and shutting the door.

In an exceptional reaction of anger and passion, Mark pulled the door back open, ripping the inside handle out of Jerry's hands. As Jerry massaged his smarting hand, he stood, unable—perhaps unwilling—to move, staring into Mark's alien-looking eyes.

"What in the hell are you doing?" asked Jerry breathlessly.

"The window of opportunity, Jerry," said Mark, his voice fragile with passion and fear. "I just ripped it open."

Mark stepped under the shower spray and sucked steamy air into his lungs. As the hot spray hit his body, his hand touched Jerry's chest, causing the burly man to quake and drop the bar of soap. Mark gently placed his arms around the hairy barrel chest and allowed his body to glide down Jerry's torso until the rigid, pulsing cock came into view.

"No, son," Jerry protested weakly, staring at his unaided erection in utter amazement.

Yes, son. Endearment. I love you . . . SON. Mark took Jerry's cock into his mouth and his entire body seemed to compress around his mouth. He felt himself shrink and fall into Jerry's urethra and down into the prostate gland. All around him, hot flesh churned and blood pulsed through myriad vessels. A rumbling sound came from below and he found himself atop a column of white-hot semen, roiled by a multitude of frenzied sperm.

Jerry's cock erupted; his body shook violently as he slowly glided down the slick tiles, as if his legs were unable to support his weight.

Mark savored the potent elixir and reeled as his own penis choked out its bounty.

As the water sprayed over them, Jerry sat on the shower floor with glazed, unbelieving eyes. Mark held his mouth locked on Jerry's cock and watched as his own semen swirled around and around and around the drain, finally slipping through the holes.

An hour later, Jerry and Mark sat opposite each other in the living room, sipping their fourth brandy.

"What have you done to me?" asked Jerry, slowly pulling back his robe and exposing a throbbing erection.

"Keeping that window open, perhaps?" answered Mark, crawling toward Jerry's cock. He took it lovingly inside his mouth and gently buried it inside his throat.

"The window of opportunity," mused Jerry, staring in wonder as his cock slipped smoothly in and out of Mark's mouth. And then he knew who the faceless phantom was. For the first time in years, suppressed memories of 1967 surfaced in his mind. He could vividly see his next door neighbor and best friend, Glenn, talking to him over the fence.

Glenn was slightly older than Jerry and built like a professional football lineman. He was always asking Jerry to go fishing with him in the Sierras, and one day Jerry decided to go. Jo had strenuously objected, of course, but Jerry figured he had earned a diversion. He and Glenn had driven for six hours, finally arriving at a beautiful, pristine lake above 5,000 feet. They pitched a tent and fished until darkness came, then cooked the fish on a campfire. After eating, they started drinking from a bottle of Jack Daniels and began to exchange sexual exploits. Finishing the bottle, they prepared for bed while playfully grabbing each other by the ass and crotch. Then Jerry found that Glenn had brought only a double sleeping bag. That night, Jerry felt Glenn's hand slowly unzipping his fly but opted to feign sleep. Later, he would rationalize that he was curious as to how far Glenn would go and, when Glenn went all the way, he further justified the act by reminding himself that he was drunk. Unfortunately, the guilt was so intense for both men that neither spoke to the other after the trip.

Glenn and his family moved away less than a year later.

Jerry felt his toes curl and sensed a wonderfully warm churning in his groin. As the point of ecstasy reached him, he felt disengaged from the couch and seemed to float above it. He grunted his message to Mark, who wedged the bloated penis deep within his throat. His throbs began at the base of his cock and rippled up to his cock head, engaging Mark's tongue, which fluttered the base, releasing throb after throb, keeping the movement alive. He could almost see his semen filling Mark's mouth, where it was savored, then reluctantly released to swirl down a quivering gullet to a stomach and its ultimate conversion to some rapture-producing sedative.

Minutes later, Mark lay fully awake and sober in a king size bed on the first level, his gaze locked on the spot where he assumed Jerry was sleeping above. He wished and wished, summoning memories of all the lucky things in his childhood. He mentally rubbed talismans and crystals and pretended to view the ceiling through a magnificent ruby, his birth stone. He willed the Disney theme song to play in his head and softly sang along with it. "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are. Everything your heart desires will come to you," he sang softly.

Hearing footfalls on the stairs, he held his breath and listened carefully, crossing his fingers and even trying to cross his toes. It never occurred to him that he was being childish . . . or worse, deranged. He heard the sound of liquid pouring into a glass and soon watched as a silhouette formed in the bedroom doorway.

"The window's still open," whispered Jerry. "I can't get it to close." Jerry moved into the path of a moonbeam. His cock was erect and bobbing up and down. A brief sparkle appeared at the slit, where a drop of precum refracted the moonlight.

Mark moved over to make room for Jerry on the bed.

ELEVEN

The Following Morning

Awakening with Mark's arm around his waist, Jerry slipped out of bed and looked down in panic at him. The room seemed to spin around; he felt like he had to throw up.

Mark stirred and opened his eyes, then closed them and turned over. "My head hurts," he mumbled. "So does my jaw."

Jerry wildly tried to remember what had happened after his third climax, but drew a blank. He felt clammy at the thought of having reciprocated. *No, I couldn't have. No way. God, please no. Don't let me be queer.* He hurried upstairs and took a quick shower and brushed his teeth more vigorously than ever before. He quickly got dressed and ran downstairs, finding Mark busily making coffee in the kitchen.

"Good morning," greeted Mark cheerfully.

"Morning," said Jerry tightly, heading for the door.

"Hey, wait a minute." Mark was concerned when Jerry's eyes avoided his. "Want some coffee?"

"No thanks."

"Okay, go ahead and do the airhead guilt thing," Mark said, throwing his hands up in disgust. "I thought your brain was a lot more developed than that."

"Airhead?" Jerry was insulted. "Don't be so presumptuous, Mark. You have no idea what's going through my head right now," shot Jerry.

"But I *do* know. I've lived it myself and I've seen that look so many times that I want to puke." He threw a spoon in the sink. "It was the same look Tony had when he walked out of my life in Chicago."

"Shit . . . I got to go," mumbled Jerry, his head throbbing with a savage headache, his penis burning with small cuts and abrasions.

"You didn't do all that last night because you're *turning gay*." Mark felt relieved as Jerry seemed to linger. "*Sexually eclectic*, perhaps, but *gay?* I don't think so. Why do you straight guys always think that you've caught some fucking disease that'll turn your queer? What happened to plain old common sense? What happened to sage phrases like, 'A hard cock has no conscience?'" He turned his attention to the pot of water he was heating. "Lighten up, for Christ's sake. It was only a goddamned blow job." He smiled to himself. *Or should I say* **three** *blow jobs.*

"And you just manipulated me, right?" Jerry was intrigued in spite of his headache and felt himself calming down. "I'll take a quick cup."

"You give me way too much credit, Jerry." Mark poured hot water into two cups he'd pre-measured with instant coffee. He handed one to Jerry. "You were scared and lonely last night. I sensed that. Scared and lonely people do crazy things sometimes, but you shouldn't feel disgusted with yourself over it. It was just an experience you may or may not want to try again someday . . . with your new best friend." Mark raised his mug in a toast. "Me."

Jerry took a sip of coffee and scalded his lip. He placed the cup on the counter. "I have to go."

"You're in trouble, aren't you?" Mark studied Jerry's expression. "Then I am, too, right?"

"I'll call you later." Jerry turned to leave. "After I know something, I'll call you."

He walked to the rental car and felt the headache begin to dissolve.

As he drove through the gateway, he looked back at the house and smiled. *I've never been manipulated or seduced in my life, drunk or sober. The guy's good . . . he's really good.*

Jerry stopped at the first shopping center and bought a pair of sunglasses. He found a barber shop and had his wavy, salt-and-pepper hair cropped into a crew cut. Finding a pay phone, he called Ross at Internal Affairs, only to learn that he was out ill. He tried to reach the surveillance van, but an electronic voice announced that the number was no longer in service.

He hung up and pondered the wisdom of his next call. Organizing in his mind what he wanted to say, he shuddered and dialed.

"Captain Morton's office," the familiar female voice sang.

"Suzy?"

"Jerry? I thought you were on vacation!" Her voice was the same as always.

"I am!" he said, laughing. "I'm getting fatter and having the time of my life and losing a lot of money."

"Sorry, but Captain's not here right now, what with all that's happened." She giggled. "Oh, my goodness, I get

to give you the scoop, don't I?"

"Scoop?"

"Captain Morton's at a news conference. One of your detectives shot and killed that Zooloo killer about two hours ago. They found the wigs, cowboy hat, leather and the body parts in the guys basement. His name was Richardson and he was one of those West Hollywood gay S and M types. *Your department solved the case!* Aren't you just proud as punch?"

Jerry felt faint and held on to the pay telephone. "Who . . . who cracked it? Uhh . . . who killed Zooloo?"

"Mingus' partner, Detective Cryder."

Jerry's voice was frozen as fear and anger raged through his brain.

"Jerry?"

"Uhh . . . yeah. Someone distracted me. Uhh . . . Great! What great news! Hey, Suzy, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure, Jerry. Anything for you."

"Uhh . . . I want to send telegrams congratulating the guys, but I don't have their addresses." He grappled for a piece of paper and pen. "Could you get into that file on your computer screen and give me some home addresses?"

"No problem."

He heard the clicking of keys. "Ready?"

"Shoot."

"I'll need Mingus', uhh . . . Cryder's, since he's the big hero. Also, give me Finnigan's and Santoro's. And boy, do I appreciate this, Suz."

As she dictated the four addresses, he wrote frantically, his pen pressing down on the paper with a vengeance. *I wonder who the poor fool was that they framed?* Then he looked at Mingus' address and realized that something didn't add up. "Uhh . . . Suz, this address for Mingus. He doesn't live in Hollywood any more. He moved about a year ago."

"That's all I have in the computer, Jerry."

"Okay," said Jerry, wondering how he would find out Mingus' address.

He hung up and called the division office.

An unfamiliar female voice answered. "Hollywood/Wilshire Homicide."

"Detective Finnigan, please," Jerry said in disguised voice roughly an octave higher than his own.

"Hold on." The woman yelled out for Finnigan, and Jerry could hear the familiar voice of another clerk, telling her that Finnigan was off that day.

Jerry wasted no time and hung up. He drove to Finnigan's house near U.C.L.A. Finnigan's squad car was in the driveway and the garage door was open. The family car was gone, indicating that Finnigan's wife and kids might be gone. Jerry combed the immediate area for a possible stake-out and eventually parked a block away. He got out of the car and, supplementing his disguise with a limp, walked to Finnigan's house.

Finnigan answered the door on the third buzz. He'd been asleep and looked terrible. When he recognized Jerry, he hurriedly pulled him inside. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm thrilled to see you, too, asshole!" barked Jerry, walking past him and pacing.

Finnigan narrowed his eyes at Jerry's short haircut, then shook his head. "You see the news conference?"

"No, I called Morton's secretary. Apparently, she's the only one who hasn't finked on me yet."

Finnigan looked ashamed. "Would you stop pacing and sit down? How about a drink?"

Jerry continued pacing, his jaw tight, his entire musculature coiled. "I had too much for my own good last night, thank you."

"I need one." Finnigan made himself a bourbon on the rocks in the kitchen and returned to the living room.

Jerry stopped pacing and stood before a picture window overlooking a well-manicured back yard with orange and avocado trees.

"It's big, Jerry, too big for little people like you, me and Santo." He drank a third of the glassful in one gulp. "I was just sitting there at your desk, agonizing over what you tried to tell me, and suddenly I hear this radio message from Cryder. Apparently—according to them—they didn't think that we were handling the task force properly and were doing their own investigation in their spare time. They say they got an anonymous phone tip, got a search warrant and went to this house in West Hollywood belonging to some gay leatherman by the name of Richardson. They found the wigs, some ether, a Harley, a cowboy hat, some disguise stuff. Then, in a refrigerator in the basement, they found the trophies. They say the guy came in undetected when they were in the basement and went after them with an unregistered forty-five. Cryder emptied his clip in the guy." He finished the drink. "Case closed, Finnigan's silenced, Santoro's being transferred . . . and you, my friend, are being forced to retire just as soon as you return from your vacation. They say you bungled the whole investigation."

Jerry turned with tears of rage in his eyes. "Are they just going to ignore the inside cop angle? Did the brass buy that?"

Finnigan returned to the kitchen to pour another drink. "They didn't ignore it, Jerry. That's the punch line." Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Jerry joined him in the kitchen.

"This Richardson was a good friend of Detective Anderson." His voice cracked. "They're bringing charges against Anderson and trying to pin the disappearance of that artist on him. At the least, he'll be busted for divulging information on an investigation. He's been suspended."

"God, what a frame-up," whispered Jerry, sitting slowly in a chair. "You'd better give me that drink."

Finnigan poured five ounces of Scotch whiskey over a glass of ice and handed it to Jerry.

"You have any idea where Mingus lives?" asked Jerry, shaking off his panic and trying to focus on a plan.

"Hollywood," said Finnigan, beginning to slur his words. "On Brea and . . . ."

"He moved last year."

Finnigan frowned. "Oh, yeah, now it comes to me. Remember when he got so drunk at that party that Morton threw?"

Jerry nodded hopefully.

"I took him home . . . this . . . warehouse of something. Across the street from some defunct iron works yard, right off Interstate Ten. Rosedale Cemetery is just a few blocks away. I thought he was crazy, but I saw him climb up a stairway to a loft above the warehouse."

Jerry had the distinct impression that he had just located Caiazza's cache of explosives.

TWELVE

Later That Evening

Jerry stared through the binoculars he'd remembered to pack. He could detect a faint light in Mingus' loft, which consisted of the second story of a small warehouse in an industrial area off Interstate 10. A larger warehouse was adjacent to the back of the loft, but structures on either side had been razed recently, isolating the building. Across the street was a closed-down steel fabrication shop. Jerry was parked five blocks away on the periphery of a dilapidated residential neighborhood. Positive that neither Finnigan nor Santoro had told the others about his vacation ruse, he wasn't particularly worried about being spotted. After all, he'd been in numerous stake-outs and knew all the angles.

Mark sat on the passenger side, staring at Jerry's hair. "Jesus, do you look sexy with short hair. You look like a marine drill sergeant."

Jerry grunted.

The boy in Mark was excited over being Jerry's new undercover partner, but the responsible man in him urged him to stop all the nonsense and get back to work at the department store. "I called my boss after I heard that the case had been solved."

"Yeah?" Jerry said absently, carefully examining every car on the street.

"He wonders why I haven't come back to work."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I would be in tomorrow."

"I wouldn't advise it, Mark."

Mark was confused. "Why not?"

"Because you're still in danger, and you're the only witness." Jerry glanced at him. "You saw the photo of the guy they pinned it on, didn't you?"

"Yeah, it wasn't the guy," Mark acknowledged, slumping in the seat. "But what would the killer want with me, now that the case has been solved? Hell, this kind of miscarriage of justice goes on all the time. The guy's free to do as he pleases now. Why would he want to kill me?"

Jerry resumed looking through the binoculars. "Because it's not just one guy who's involved. There are others . . . and it's about the nastiest-looking conspiracy I've ever seen in this city."

"Conspiracy?" Mark gave him a doubting look.

Jerry groaned. "Oh, shit! Not you, too!"

"Would you please tell me what's going on?" Mark demanded indignantly. "You're a homicide division commander, damn it, and here we are slinking through the night together. Where are all your people?"

Jerry reluctantly told Mark the whole story and prayed that he would believe it. After Jerry finished, he contemplated Mark's expression, which evolved into a look of stark terror. Relieved, the lieutenant slumped in the seat. "Finally, someone believes me." He continued looking through the binoculars.

"So how do I make a living now?" Mark was exasperated. "Do I live with you and some girl friend? Are you willing to support me? I warn you, I have very expensive tastes. I like brie, Johnny Walker, lobster, and occasionally I buy expensive patés with real truffles. I also . . . ."

"I haven't had a girl friend in ages."

"Oh." Mark looked the other way. *You're gonna have a boy friend if you aren't careful.*

Jerry lowered the binoculars. "I heard that!" The detective laughed robustly.

Mark panicked, wondering if he'd said the remark instead of thought it. Realizing that Jerry was toying with him, he laughed along.

When the laughter died down they studied each other briefly and fell into a period of pensive silence.

"Maybe I could take medical leave," said Mark, "if I could get a doctor to write a letter."

"I got a doctor who owes me a favor," recalled Jerry.

"Jesus, how many people owe you favors?" asked Mark, chuckling.

"He lives in Beverly Hills now," continued Jerry. "You call your boss tomorrow morning and tell him you'll provide him with a letter tomorrow afternoon."

"What if he fires me?"

"Then you sue him. He won't." Jerry became tense. "Well looky here."

Mingus drove into the warehouse parking lot in a brand new unmarked squad car. Slowly moving up the street were three more cars, which likewise pulled into the lot. Mingus got out and walked to a black Cadillac to greet the dapper, white-haired Deputy Chief Caiazza, who was accompanied by a tall chauffeur with a shaved head. The second car contained four men with short haircuts and stern expressions, made more menacing by the effect of moonlight and security lights from a fabrication shop across the street. Jerry recognized the two men who had followed him to the Burbank Airport. As the seven men walked up the back stairway to Mingus' loft, a yellow Volkswagen pulled into the lot. Jerry wasn't surprised to see that the driver was Detective Cryder, complete with a bandaged left hand. What hurt him deeply was the fact that the woman who got out on the driver's side was Reba Martin, Finnigan's partner.

As Jerry watched the entourage disappear into the

loft, he realized just how wide-spread the conspiracy was. Of course, Reba knew all the specifics on the case and had obviously related them to Cryder. Jerry shuddered as he wondered just how much inside information Finnigan had told her.

Nauseated and numb, Jerry started the car and slowly drove in the opposite direction, turning on the headlights only after they were out of sight of the loft.

As Jerry stood on the terrace in the moonlight, Mark sensed that the big cop wanted to be alone. He put on a CD recording of Kiri te Kanawa singing Strauss' 'Four Last Songs' and switched on the speakers near the spa. Undressing and changing into a robe, he uncovered and turned on the spa, easing into the 107 degree water. Eventually, he found an escape in the music and closed his eyes. Having learned the German words to the first of the four songs while at SMU, he sang along in head tones. Toward the end of the first song, he heard footsteps and opened his eyes. Jerry was climbing the stairs to the spa.

"You were singing along in German, weren't you?" Jerry looked enchanted.

"Humming along is more like it," Mark explained.

Jerry nodded toward the outside pool. "Outside pool's heated if you'd like to use it."

"Only if you swim with me."

Jerry looked away nervously. "Not tonight."

"I promise I won't touch you." Mark was determined to say the right things. "I just thought I could help you work things out. You're going through hell."

Jerry smiled at him, appreciating Mark's concern. But he was unwilling to expose his nude body, fearing that it would encourage Mark. He didn't want a repeat of the previous night—at least not yet. *Here I am, afraid to get into the head of a serial killer, yet I've allowed a man who loves me into mine.* "After you get out, we'll talk."

"It's better here." Mark gestured with his hand to the opposite side of the ten by ten foot spa. "You need to relax. Don't worry about sending me the wrong signal."

Jerry was amazed at Mark's knack for making astute observations and defusing his anxiety. "I need a drink."

"You shouldn't drink in these things, especially with your hypertension. Have you been taking your pills?"

The big cop could only shake his head in bewilderment and amazement. "Who says I'm getting in? And what concern is it of yours if I take my pills or not?" Jerry couldn't remember telling Mark about his medical condition.

"You did bring your medication with you?" asked Mark, keeping Jerry off guard.

Jerry looked perplexed. "Hey, it's not your problem, okay?" He scowled. "Jeez!"

Mark smiled as Jerry walked to the bar to pour himself a brandy. He closed his eyes and sang along with the second song. A short time later, he opened his eyes to find Jerry sitting inside the spa across from him.

The lieutenant sipped the brandy defiantly. "Why don't you sing with full power?"

"That wouldn't show the proper reverence toward Kiri."

Jerry rolled his eyes up. "No, I suppose it wouldn't."

Mark studied Jerry carefully, wishing he had the expertise to help him solve his problems. "I *really do* know the hell you're going through."

"No you don't."

"Okay, so I'm *trying* to know. At least I sense a lot of it," offered Mark. "That has to be the most compassionate thing said to you in a long time, isn't it?"

Jerry shrugged. "What do you care, really?"

Mark was taken aback by Jerry's sudden coolness. "I care about you."

"You *should* care about your protector." Jerry felt compelled to discourage Mark.

"Beyond that, Jerry. *Way* beyond that."

Jerry digested the comment.

"I didn't take you in conquest last night, Jerry." He swallowed, not sure about what he was about to say. "I did it because I wanted to reach you, to . . . to . . . get your attention."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want our relationship to end after this is over."

Jerry looked at Mark's earnest expression and felt his defenses begin to crumble.

"It's too hot in here," said Mark.

Jerry lifted a control cover and turned a knob. "I'll drop it to one hundred."

"Quid pro quo," suggested Mark, smiling.

"You sound like George Bush. Okay, you first," Jerry said, returning the smile. "Tell me about your first experience with a man."

Mark contemplated Jerry's smile and dug into his memory. "By the time I was a freshman at SMU I'd already horsed around a little bit, but that was when I was much younger. I started dating girls when I was a junior in high school and almost got married right out of high school. Can you imagine that disaster? But something happened one night in my freshman year. I saw this big guy cooking hamburgers in an off-campus hamburger joint." Mark focused on the memory until it became lucid. "I walked by that place countless times and ate there by myself every night. Any excuse to be there. I just couldn't keep my eyes off him. He was about thirty and built like you, and he had tan . . . almost beige eyes. I must have looked once too often, because he started staring at me and soon the waiters were staring at me, too." Mark was amazed at how vivid the memory was. "So I went to a university psychologist, who told me that I wasn't a homosexual—that my attraction to this guy was only *displaced affection* for my father." Mark glanced at Jerry. "Ain't that a kick in the butt?"

Jerry nodded in fascination.

"After that, I found out the cook's name: Mike. I couldn't help myself, and I called him at the restaurant one

night. I was across the street in a phone booth. I invited him out to dinner. Strangely enough, he was really compassionate. He asked me if I was gay and suggested I seek professional help. Then his boss got on the phone and told me not to call him again. One night I waited until he got off and walked up to him and introduced myself. We walked a couple of blocks and, again, he was really nice to me. I told him that I was obsessed with him and even told him about the psychologist. He asked me if I thought I was gay and I told him no way. And then he said, 'You're gay but you just don't know it.' Well, I was devastated and knew that I needed help. Not too long after that, I approached a musicology professor who was openly gay, and I brazenly asked him to give me some advice. He was a really caring and compassionate man. Never tried to make out with me. He just talked to me all night and convinced me that I was gay. Then he introduced me to all these . . . *queens* and I said to myself: *wait a fucking minute!* Is *this* what being gay is all about? Hell, I wasn't attracted to these bozos! I was attracted to *men* like Mike, the hamburger cook." He sighed and inspected his shriveled hands.

"Let's get out," said Jerry, standing up and exposing a semi-erect cock. The lieutenant pulled two large towels from a hidden bin and handed one to Mark.

Not wanting to break the spell, Mark avoided looking at the Jerry's nakedness as both men dried off and slipped into their robes.

Jerry led the way into the living room. "And?"

Mark poured himself a brandy and joined Jerry on the couch. "And . . . it wasn't until the following year that I consummated my homosexuality. I found out that Mike, the hamburger cook, had gone big time and opened up a restaurant on the other side of the campus. I went over there one night and he was inside at the cash register near the store front. He looked out through the window and spotted me. Oddly enough, he recognized me and came outside for a couple of minutes. I told him that I now realized that I was gay and that I wanted him. He looked at me sort of strange like and said that he wasn't gay, but that he'd talk to me again and give me a lift to my dorm. I waited outside until he finally closed up a couple of hours later, then he invited me inside and we went out to his car in back. Then when we got inside his car, he turned around and looked at me and sort of sighed and said, 'You wanna blow me?' Well, I took him right there and it was not at all like I had anticipated. I never hesitated or gagged and went after it with a vengeance. It was almost a religious experience. And after that I was sort of imprinted, you know? Nothing but a real man would do after that."

Jerry was enthralled, eagerly processing Mark's every word.

"All those gay students I'd met the year before when I was a sort of 'activist'--they turned against me for not having anything to do with them sexually. They called me a fool and would say things like, 'Who do you think you're kidding, acting so butch and pretending you're better than us?' Then I met other young guys like myself and realized that I didn't have to be a screamer to be gay. After that, obviously gay people made my skin crawl. They were alien to me. That's why I've never been comfortable with the word 'gay.' I certainly don't identify with the word today."

"The word doesn't mean the same as it did," prompted Jerry.

"The word has evolved to define a life style, an *affectation*," Mark continued. "The gay mainstream now consists of openly gay and lesbian *kids* who have a political axe to grind. They call themselves "queer" now, for God's sake. And if you don't *look* and *act* like them, then you're trying to look straight and suffering from internalized homophobia. What a crock of shit!" Mark sipped his brandy and glanced at a growing bulge in Jerry's robe. *Do the opposite of what he anticipates,* Mark reminded himself. "You know what I think? I think that there are two basic types of men who like same-sex activity. One is the affected, obvious type and the other is the masculine type, who pretty much keeps a low profile. The former likes men because he thinks like a female. Essentially, he's a straight woman trapped in a man's body. The other is the one who's truly sexually diverse. The majority of men who have some sort of same-sex activity come from that group, I believe. My group, if you will. Make any sense?"

Jerry considered it. "Yeah, in a way."

Mark was amused at Jerry's confused expression. "In any event, I don't consider myself gay. Hate the word. I like the word 'homan,' which also means 'portly' in Japanese. I like the sound of 'man.' *Homen* sounds much better than *gays*, don't you think?"

Jerry smiled. "Yeah, I guess it does."

"Quid pro quo," reminded Mark.

"My turn, huh?" *Okay, you crazy bastard, I'm gonna blow your mind.* Jerry glanced mischievously at him. "The last time I had three climaxes in the same night was when I was in my twenties. Which is strange . . . because I'm basically impotent, very lonely and suicidal."

A chill drifted up Mark's back, spreading over his head and face.

"I've spent the last couple of years drinking heavily, working long hours and trying to figure myself out. I wonder what life is all about. There's no joy in my life any more. Food makes me fat, booze puts me to sleep, stress makes my heart beat funny and I need a machine to help me jack off. I've even run out of fantasies to masturbate to! And now, I've lost my entire department and will soon be put out to pasture if they don't kill me first." Jerry felt remorseful over his bluntness. "So who is this man who comes into my life and gets me to do something I never considered doing before? Are you that powerful, or am I that far gone? Do we have some karmic connection—as my younger daughter used to say? Are you going to suck my cock, or do I have to beg you?"

The word *no* stuck in Mark's throat as Jerry's large hand swept away the front of his robe, exposing an

erection.

Mark felt helpless and knelt before Jerry, studying the fat thumb on the big cop's left hand. He sucked it into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it, drawing a surprised glance from Jerry. *Do the opposite of what he anticipates.* Letting the thumb slip out, he slowly sucked a testicle into his mouth and felt a sense of omnipotence as Jerry trembled and flexed his thighs. *I want to know your body like my own. I want to know all your sweet spots and learn to play you like a magnificent pipe organ.*

THIRTEEN

The Next Morning

Against his better judgment, Jerry agreed to drive Mark to Beverly Hills to see if he could get a leave of absence from his boss at Felden-Wysock. Jerry had wanted Mark to call his boss, but Mark had convinced him that such method would only get him fired, that only a face-to-face meeting would be effective. Mark had no idea what excuse he would give and hoped that an idea would be forthcoming.

Jerry drove around each adjacent block until he was sure that no one was watching from a parked car. Parking two blocks away and donning sunglasses, both men walked to the department store and took the escalator to the fifth floor, where the regional offices were. As Jerry sat in a waiting area filled with prospective employees, Mark reluctantly walked down a hallway to his boss' office.

A few minutes later, Mark emerged from the hallway with a unusual smile on his face. He waved at Jerry and turned down another hallway. Then Jerry noticed a young man with short hair and blue eyes sitting in a corner. He was staring in Jerry's direction. Jerry mentally frisked the man, looking for bulges at his chest, waist and ankles. He studied the young man's eyes and saw that they weren't focused on anything in particular. Eventually the young man looked down and began writing on an employment application, prompting Jerry to lean back and relax.

A short time later, Mark strode around the desk of the receptionist and gave Jerry a nod to follow.

Jerry had to scurry to catch up with Mark, who had already reached the down escalator. "So? What happened?"

"He fired me," Mark said, waving his final paycheck.

"That sonofabitch!" spat Jerry, looking back toward the offices threateningly. "Let me go back and try to straighten it out."

Mark turned to him and emphatically said, "No. It's done and over with. I hated the goddamned job anyway. Besides, it's obvious that he's been in touch with someone at homicide the way he looked at me. He's probably calling them right now."

Impressed with Mark's better judgment, Jerry carefully scanned everyone in sight as they hurriedly walked to the car.

Well inside the car, Jerry surprised Mark by affectionately squeezing his neck. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault." Mark smiled. "Does this mean that we can be together a little longer?"

Jerry playfully narrowed his eyes. "Hey, are you sure you didn't quit just so you could sleep with me again?" Jerry realized what he'd said and became flustered. His extremes of ambivalence confused him. In one respect, he felt less masculine, yet on the other, he felt like testosterone was oozing from his pores.

Mark wisely pretended not to notice the remark. Now wasn't the time for celebrating progress in their relationship. It was time to progress further. "I'm starved. How about lunch?"

"Okay, but let's get away from here." Jerry started the car and drove toward West Hollywood.

"I know this dark French restaurant with a piano bar on Sunset."

"Gay?"

"Depends on who's there," Mark said. "Besides, what difference does it make? They serve good food."

As the two men walked into the dim restaurant, they had to wait a few seconds to grow accustomed to the darkness. A piano was playing but abruptly stopped.

"Where in the fuck have you been!" shouted the pianist. The frail young man slapped his hand over his mouth and looked around as several patrons laughed at his remark.

Jerry was so embarrassed that he wanted to walk out, but Mark led him by the elbow to his friend, Paxton. "This is a set-up," growled Jerry softly.

"Hello," said Paxton to Jerry. He said it sweetly with an undercurrent harmonic of *I-know-what's-going-on-between-you*. He turned to Mark. "Where have you been?" he whispered.

Mark realized that Jerry felt very uneasy, so he held up two fingers to the Maitre d', who led Jerry into the back. "I was out of town," whispered Mark.

"You're here to sing for him, aren't you?" Paxton guessed correctly.

Mark smiled and followed Jerry to their table as Paxton broke into an arrangement of "Send in the Clowns."

They were seated in a remote booth Jerry had insisted upon, and both men ordered Scotch and water.

Jerry turned and looked back at Paxton.

"He's my best friend in L.A. Hell, the *only* friend. He's the one I wanted you to let me see."

"He looks gay," Jerry pointed out. "Is he some sort of exception to your rule?"

Mark glanced fondly at Paxton. "That's not what I call *affectation*. He's naturally effeminate . . . funny and crazy as hell."

"I just wonder if Caiazza and his boys know about him," worried Jerry.

"There's no way they could have. He doesn't have my work number, and, besides, I do—*did*— a lot of traveling. He always greets me that way." Mark smiled assuringly at Jerry.

"Smart ass, aren't you?" mumbled Jerry. "What if he called your apartment and left a message?"

"His messages on the box wouldn't help Mingus. Paxton screams and hangs up. That's his message."

"Oh."

They finished their first drinks then ordered another round with the lunch special. Mark excused himself and walked toward the piano bar.

Jerry became lost in his Scotch. He had some vague idea of what he intended to do next but didn't have the confidence to go it alone against Caiazza and his gang of neo-Nazis. It occurred to him that perhaps he should just merrily "return" from his vacation, take his forced retirement like a lamb and head for Texas. He wondered how he could enlist Finnigan and Santoro to help, and if he should even consider asking Kenzo and Steele. *How do I contact them safely? Where do we meet?*

"Smell of lushness, singing trees, distant thunder, buzz of bees . . . "

What if someone is followed to the meeting? So many questions. Jerry was only vaguely aware of the rich tenor voice.

" . . . Rippling water, drifting clouds, far away from frantic crowds . . ."

Something stirred within him and he felt anxious.

" . . . Getting high on rich, moist air, rubbing fingers through chest hair . . ."

He glanced at his watch and wondered what was keeping Mark. Then he became aware of Paxton's richly melodic and unique accompaniment. What he was playing certainly wasn't piano bar music.

" . . . Rabbit sees us, runs in fear, you and I just lying here . . ."

Then he realized that the voice was singing one of the most intricately beautiful songs he'd ever heard. He slid out of the booth.

" . . . Raindrops pelt our sizzling skin, passion rises, fun begins . . ."

Jerry became awestruck and made his way toward the piano bar.

" . . . Black cloud ruptures, rising steam, thunder muffles climax screams . . ."

He had no idea that Mark could sing so well.

" . . . Thunder fades to moans and sighs, sunbeams streaking, chilled skin dries..."

He sat down at the piano bar and realized that all the other patrons were silent in spite of the erotic nature of the song. Even the waiters had stopped serving in order to listen.

" . . . Trickling raindrops, wafting mist, sandman coming, can't resist."

He glanced at Paxton, who seemed to be both pleased and relieved that he had played the difficult piece so well. Then he looked into Mark's eyes and became profoundly moved by the love he saw in them.

Jerry ate in silence as the song played over and over again in his mind. The hair on the back of his neck continued to tingle, and he felt somehow altered. "You really wrote that?" he asked at length.

Mark chuckled. "I wrote it for a composition course in college, but the prof thought it was too sexy. I got a 'D' on it. Paxton and I have done it together at his apartment a couple of times." He could sense Jerry's reaction and marvelled over how well he had sung after so many years of vocal neglect. He glanced up at Jerry and saw a little smile form, then fade.

During the ride to Cliff House, Jerry tried to shake off the experience in the restaurant in order to plan out a strategy, but he just couldn't get the song out of his mind. By the time they had arrived at the house and gone their separate ways to freshen up, Jerry had one of the hardest erections he'd ever experienced.

Both men donned white silk robes and met at the bar, where Mark made two more drinks and led Jerry into the entertainment room.

"She says that this room has about a quarter of a million dollars worth of equipment in it," Jerry pointed out. "Books, records, CDs, tapes, videos, cameras, speakers, mixers, amplifiers . . . you name it, it's here." Jerry sat on a plush, leather love seat.

Mark sat at the other end and made sure that his expression was casual. He sipped his drink and placed his bare feet upon a glass coffee table. "You want to hear some more Jean-Michelle Jarre?"

"Who?"

"The guy who recorded 'Zoolook.' She's got all his recordings here. It's really exotic. You want to hear some?"

"Sure, why not?" Jerry said, yawning and stretching out like Mark.

Mark stood up and thumbed through a shelf containing CDs. He glanced down at Jerry and saw that he had an erection. Smiling to himself, he placed a disc inside the player and pressed the start button. "This will blow your mind."

"Your singing already blew my mind."

"Really?" Mark glanced down at Jerry's erection, which was now half exposed.

"It gave me a boner." Jerry pulled back the robe. "I've had it ever since I heard you sing."

Mark inspected the raw penis and found the strength to hold back. Certainly he could take Jerry like he did before, but he wanted to see just how far the burly man would go as the new sensation in his groin became more intense. Mark sensed a man longing to break free of the preconditioning chains that had bound him throughout his life. He saw a man who had been playing quarter slot machines for forty years, only to become addicted to baccarat, roulette and dice. "I'll be right back." Mark went into the guest bathroom and picked out a bottle of medicated lotion, then returned and knelt before Jerry.

"What's that?"

"Something to help you heal. I'm afraid I got a little rough with junior here." Mark poured a dollop in his hands and rubbed them vigorously, then applied the soothing ointment to Jerry's cock.

Jerry closed his eyes and moaned.

"Get into the music," Mark urged. "Listen to it and let it create symbols and visions in your brain. Get lost in it while I heal junior here."

Arching an eyebrow, Jerry opened one eye, then closed it, smiling. "Where the hell are you trying to lead me?"

"I'm not leading you, I'm following."

Jerry raised both eyebrows in reaction to the statement, but didn't open his eyes. "Then let's go."

Mark's hands created wet, slick sounds as he gently massaged Jerry's cock.

"I like the music," said Jerry dreamily. "It sounds like nothing I've ever heard before."

"This piece is called *"Arpegiateur"* in French. I guess it derives from the word arpeggio, which is a musical term meaning . . . oh . . . playing the notes in a chord in rapid succession. The thing that excites me about this piece is its intricate structure, his juxtaposition of idioms, the . . . ."

Jerry laughed.

"Sorry, I get carried away." Mark kissed Jerry's stomach, then grasped the detective's firm, round buttocks and licked his ample scrotum.

Instead of tensing, Jerry relaxed even more, welcoming anything that Mark wanted to do to him. All the fear, anxiety and anger were out there waiting for him, he knew, but he was hidden in this little niche, this hiding place that Mark had created for him. Reality had to be faced, but not now.

"Coming up, you can hear this subtle jazz idiom being introduced, then developed," Mark said breathlessly, sending his tongue to rendezvous with Jerry's hard, pink nipples. He swirled his tongue around one, then the other, causing Jerry to squirm. *Ahah! Another sweet spot,* Mark celebrated, doing it again. He buried his nose in Jerry's mat of salt-and-pepper chest hair and inhaled this special man's essence.

Mark reluctantly pulled away from him and forwarded the disk to the piece he most wanted to try out on Jerry.

"Hey, I liked it," protested Jerry, his eyes still closed, his cock swaying, drooling.

"This is better," Mark said, resuming his previous position. "This is the fourth *'Les Chants Magnetiques.'* No narration required. It either turns you on, or it doesn't." Mark then remembered the persistent fantasy he conjured every time he played the piece at home. "Okay, one more bit of narration when the time comes. Just remember that whatever I ask you to do, it's therapy, okay?"

Jerry didn't answer, only smiled. "It's soothing, yet provocative. Sounds like a Latin beat."

The piece featured a haunting, sweet melody against a backdrop of a rhythm either too fast or too slow for most of the Latin dances. Mark had previously labeled it a slow *merengue* with myriad, teasing sub-beats. His most beloved fantasy was to find a real man to dance it with him on a deserted beach while a bonfire roared nearby.

As Mark made love to Jerry's chest, stomach and testicles, he continued to massage the turgid cock, replenishing the lotion as the skin soaked up the moisture.

Jerry was enchanted with the music and felt an alien emotion as the sweet melody was replaced by a lower-pitched, more passionate one. The theme became increasingly urgent and stretched out ecstatically over the driving dance rhythm, lifting Jerry to a higher plane of escape.

"You're on a deserted beach somewhere in the Bahamas. It's hot, Jerry. So very hot. In spite of that, there's a bonfire nearby. The waves crash and send warm surf, tickling your feet and ankles. You're dancing with someone . . . someone you care about. You move from one foot to the other in a grinding, fluid motion to the beat of the music."

Jerry's cock became even more rigid and throbbed in Mark's hand.

"You're there, Jerry, there on the beach. Get up and dance, Jerry. At least, get up and sway to it. Let the music move you, Jerry."

Mark held Jerry's big hands and lured him to his feet and into the center of the room. *Oh, shit, it's working,* he thought as Jerry's hips slightly moved with the music. He looked up and saw closed eyes and a smile without a trace of self-consciousness. Mark massaged the cock again and watched in amazement as Jerry let the robe slide to the floor, swaying with the music.

In all his life, Mark had never been so utterly mesmerized by one man's chemistry. He licked Jerry's balls and gazed upward, through the forest of abdominal hair, between the pectoral muscles. He focused upon Jerry's delicious-looking lips as they parted, exposing the tip of a tongue on the verge of exploring the mouth of the person in his fantasy. Mark wondered who that person might be.

The music held Jerry in erotic limbo as he danced hotly with the nebulous, androgenous form in his fantasy. The person in his arms was faceless, yet he kissed the phantom deeply, felt an estrus so strong that his cock ached for a release.

Mark slowly rose, gliding up Jerry's trembling, sweating torso. As their faces met, he gently placed his arms around Jerry and squeezed lightly. He felt giddy and realized that he was falling in love. He squeezed again and felt a slight reciprocation from Jerry, but it wasn't a clear signal to go further. Careful not to shatter Jerry's fantasy, Mark slid back down to the floor, then began sucking the big cop's balls in earnest and driving him wild with slick, soft hands.

Jerry's climax was explosive. His body quaked acutely and a roar tumbled out of his throat. The first line of semen struck Mark across his neck and back. The second clung to his hair. The third discharge shot into Mark's waiting mouth, where it was savored and lolled about like a fine

wine. Mark closed his eyes as the final two spurts landed upon his forehead and right cheek.

Jerry opened his eyes and witnessed the spectacle of Mark's face with a mixture of curiosity, revulsion and compassion. "Get yourself off, Mark. This can't be one-sided," Jerry said breathlessly, grabbing Mark by the back of his head and rubbing the younger man's face into his crotch. "Cum, Mark. Shoot it!"

Mark only had to pump himself twice to get off. He cried out, muffling the sounds of the most potent sexual experience of his life. Holding his load in his left hand, he tenderly licked residue from Jerry's pubic hair and stomach as the heavy man slowly knelt, then rolled onto his back. He sighed with a shudder.

While Jerry lay on the floor trying to decipher what had just happened to him, Mark got up and turned off the CD player with a shaky hand.

Shortly, Jerry fell asleep. Mark sipped his Scotch and tried to will himself into the brain of the man he loved.

While Mark prepared some expensive-looking frozen entrées in the microwave oven, he watched Jerry as he stared out at the city lights. At first Mark was concerned that Jerry had experienced a guilt reaction, but he eventually surmised that the big cop had much more important and pressing problems to think about.

As they sat at the breakfast bar eating the delicious food, Jerry shared his thoughts. "I thought we'd go out to a bunch of different phone booths and make calls to Finnigan, Santoro, Kenzo and Steele. Who knows? Maybe their lines are tapped, so we'd have to be real careful. I'm almost positive Finnigan's is."

"What will you say to them?" Mark asked. He was wondering to himself how Jerry could expect any of them to even speak if they thought their lines were bugged.

"If they agree to help out, we'll all meet at a prearranged location and iron out all the details of my plan of attack. Here's some of the ideas I can throw out to them: Okay, I could carefully approach the FBI to see if they would be interested in your testimony. Although the murders themselves are out of their jurisdiction, a widespread conspiracy against homosexuals and other minorities isn't. Neither is a violation of civil rights. Besides, the FBI was investigating Caiazza anyway and would probably jump at the chance to go after him on two fronts. Next, Santo. She could approach the more militant gay and lesbian activists and feel them out, maybe whip them up into an outcry over the framing of a gay cop and the guy Cryder killed. Surely those guys had alibis. Finnigan can hit up the ACLU and Kenzo and Steel could keep us informed on what Mingus and Cryder are doing."

"I don't think they'll do it. I'll bet they're scared out their minds."

"Scared *shitless*, but they're all good cops," Jerry said, trying to map out more strategy.

"You know what I think?" Mark waited until he had Jerry's attention. "I think you should go in and meekly take your retirement and buy a farm in Texas while you're still in one piece." He smiled. "You could take me along as a hired *hand."* He snorted a chuckle.

Jerry couldn't keep from smiling but continued without a comment. "Our main problem is communication, though."

"No it isn't," Mark said smugly.

Jerry studied his expression. "I suppose you have a better way, huh, *amateur* detective?"

"Maybe." He hopped off his stool and walked toward the stairway. "I want to show you something."

Jerry followed Mark upstairs into the study adjacent to the master bedroom. Reaching the room, Jerry watched as Mark knelt near a desk.

Mark pointed at a dual phone jack. "Follow this."

Jerry followed one wire to a telephone. The other led to a wooden, pyramid-shaped box with small lights on it. "I didn't think she had one of these. *Of course!* She got it when she knew she was being railroaded."

"It's a privacy monitor, isn't it?" asked Mark.

"Yeah, one of those real sophisticated ones," said Jerry, whistling. "This one can detect a line tap at either end of the conversation." He beamed at Mark. "Hey, we make a great team, don't we?"

I hope so, Mark thought.

They brought coffee and brandy up to the study; Jerry made the calls to Santoro, Kenzo and Steele's homes as Mark gave him thumbs up each time the green light came on. None of the detectives' phones were tapped, and Jerry made that fact known at the beginning of each conversation. Yes, they wanted to help and couldn't live with themselves without doing something. Since they were free to speak and there was no chance Caiazza's men could trace the calls, Jerry decided not to take a chance on a meeting. Instead, he outlined his plans on the telephone and got commitments from each detective. Santoro agreed to cautiously approach a group called GALE, or *Gays And Lesbians Enraged*. Jerry warned her not to identify herself. Both Kenzo and Steele promised to keep Jerry apprised of rumors and the actions of Mingus and Cryder. Jerry wrote down each detective's upcoming work schedule and advised when he would contact them again.

"Now for Finnigan," Jerry said worriedly. "He's in a hornets' nest at work, and there's an ongoing battle at home with that bitch he's married to. I just hope I can still trust him." He dialed Finnigan's home number. "If the line's tapped, you take the phone and ask for *Mister* Finnigan. When he gets on, tell him . . . tell him that you're his son's counsellor and . . . hell, you'll think of something."

"What's his son's name? What if Finnigan knows the counsellor?"

"The kid's name is Shelby. Just wing it."

"Hello?" An irritated woman's voice.

A red light came on, indicating that the line was being tapped, prompting Jerry to nimbly hand the phone to Mark.

"Uhh . . . Mister Finnigan, please." Mark's voice

quavered.

There was the sound of a roughly placed receiver, followed by a cold: "It's for you."

Finnigan spoke. "Yeah."

"Uhh . . . Mister Finnigan, this is Julius Roberts, Shelby's counsellor at school."

Jerry smiled and mouthed the name. *Julius Roberts?*

"Yes, Mister Roberts," said Finnigan. "Is Shelby in some sort of trouble?"

"No, uhh . . . no, he's doing just fine. It's just that I'd like to talk to you about his musical talent. The school just did some testing to find out if any of the students had hidden musical talent, and Shelby scored quite high."

The red light went off, prompting Mark to hand the receiver to Jerry.

"Finn?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"This is Jerry, Finn. Look, I'm on a safe line for the time being, but they might come back on. There's no wire tap at either end right now, but if I suddenly hang up, you'll know they came back on."

Silence.

"Finn?"

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," said Jerry, alarmed over the sound of Finnigan's voice, which sounded hollow and fearful. "How are you, partner?"

"It's shitty here and unbearable at the division; otherwise, everything's peachy."

"What are they doing to you?"

"They never did buy my story about Graham."

"What did you tell them?"

Finnigan gulped as if he had taken a large swallow from a drink. "That he slipped out of the apartment and disappeared. That he was so scared that he was having panic attacks. Santo and I both told them that. You talk to her?"

"Just now. They haven't fucked with her at her new station. Looks like you're taking all the heat."

"Jerry, I think I'm going to quit the force and maybe go up north with my son. Start all over, you know?" His voice was hushed so that his wife couldn't overhear.

"Agree to help us and maybe you can land that lieutenant's spot for good."

Finnigan laughed bitterly. "You're a fucking dreamer, Jer. They got it all, man. Caiazza's gonna be chief of police someday, and his fucking storm troopers are going to start a goddamn race war. And what's all this *us* shit? You really think that anybody's dumb enough to help you?"

"They've already promised me, Finn. I'd like to have you with us, but we can do it without you if we have to."

"Who?"

Jerry decided not to trust Finnigan just yet. "I can't tell you that."

Finnigan fell silent and Jerry could hear him pour another drink. "So what can I do?" he asked after a pause.

"Contact the ACLU and feel them out. Do it by pay phone and talk to the person who handles gay rights issues. You don't have to identify yourself. Just tell them about the double frame-up with Anderson and the leatherman and tell them that we have a witness who can finger the real killer. The bottom line is to get people to start asking questions at City Hall in front of television cameras."

"And then I'm dead meat for sure, Jerry. No deal!"

"By that time, the division will be crawling with feds, Finn." Jerry was losing his patience. "Just start the ball rolling, then get out of town until I do my thing. That's all I ask."

"I don't want to die, Jer," Finnigan said, his voice cracking with emotion. "I want to go off some place with my boy. I want him to have a future."

Jerry felt a heaving in his chest, like he was about to cry for Finnigan. "I gotta go, Finn. Got a busy day tomorrow. Can I count on you or not?"

The red light came back on and Mark signaled Jerry, who promptly hung up.

"You think he'll help?" asked Mark.

"Yeah . . . that big redheaded sonofabitch is my friend, Mark. He'll come through with something.

FOURTEEN

The Following Morning

Wearing sunglasses and a ball cap, Jerry stood at a pay telephone outside a Denny's restaurant in Van Nuys. He dialed the number for the FBI and looked at his watch. *Not yet,* he reminded himself. *Test him first. You'll know if he's tracing the call.*

"FBI," an operator announced.

"Agent Ronald Dees in Behavioral Science, please," said Jerry.

There was a beep, signaling that the call was being recorded. Seconds passed, then a minute. More beeps.

"Come on," urged Jerry, his nerves on edge.

"Agent Dees here."

"Ron!"

"Yes?"

"Ron, this is Jerry Zeitler." Jerry placed his wristwatch in stop-watch mode and stared at it.

"Hey, Jerry!" The serial killer expert he had worked with on the Full Moon case sounded pleased to hear from him. "Congratulations are in order, I suppose . . . or don't you really want to retire."

"Retire?"

"Captain Morton sent us the announcement yesterday, so you can 'fess up."

No, if he was in on it, he wouldn't say anything about the retirement, would he? Stick to the plan, he ordered himself. "Ron, I'm at a phone booth and I have to hang up in a few more seconds, so I have to make this brief and to the point. If you tell others about this call, it could have disastrous consequences, so be discreet, okay?"

"*Jesus*. Okay."

"I need to talk to the agent in charge of the Caiazza investigation."

"Cai—"

"Mafia and neo-Nazi connections."

"I'll find out. You're in trouble, aren't you?"

"Trouble is an understatement. Have him in your office in thirty minutes. I'll call again from a different location."

"You can't trust the fucking FBI?"

"I can't trust *anyone* right now, Ron."

"That bad?"

"That bad," said Jerry, hanging up. Trembling, he walked into the restaurant and had breakfast with Mark, who had already ordered for both of them.

Re-setting his stop-watch, Jerry drove to a nearby shopping center and parked in the parking lot. He pointed at a yogurt shop sign. "You want some yogurt?"

Mark shook his head. "I'm too nervous."

Jerry smiled. "Yeah, well this tough old cop is, too."

"You think you can trust this FBI man?" asked Mark.

"Yeah, I think so, but I don't know about the man he's putting me in touch with. He could be a friend of Caiazza's." Jerry abruptly started the car again. "Jesus, I can't just sit here."

Jerry drove slowly through the parking lot, then out to the street. Driving aimlessly until twenty-five minutes had elapsed, he stopped the car near a pay phone next to a Mobil station in North Hollywood. He called Ron again.

"Agent Dees," he answered.

"Jerry. Put him on."

"Hold on."

Jerry heard clicking footsteps, then a woman's voice.

"This is Agent Maxwell," said a woman.

"Do you head up the Caiazza investigation?" asked Jerry, irritated that he had to deal with a woman.

"You talk. I can't," she said curtly.

"Okay. I have other goods on him and I need the FBI to shield me and my witness. There's a conspiracy going on, and seven people have been killed so far. Talk to Ron. The Zooloo solution was a sham. Zooloo is a neo-Nazi homicide detective and I have a witness who can identify him. There is no serial killer. The detective can be tied to Caiazza."

She was silent.

"Times up, lady. I'll call you in one hour, same routine. Either join the party or I'll blab all I know to the Times and run like hell. You won't look good." He hung up.

"So?" Mark was concerned over Jerry's obvious frustration.

"We'll know in an hour." He smiled at Mark. "So what do you want to do for an hour?"

"Take a drive along Mulholland Drive," said Mark. "I've never done that before."

"You got it."

Jerry turned on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and headed for the famous street atop the hills that bisect Los Angeles. Not far from the house where they were staying, Jerry pulled off into a parking lot adjacent to a small park.

Jerry got out of the car and pointed at a sharp curve they had just driven through. "I lost count of how many fatalities there've been in that one spot."

Mark got out of the car and joined him.

"There are worse curves all over the place, but that one seems to be the deadliest." Jerry turned and walked into the park. "Someone told me once that there were electromagnetic zones all over the place and that the energy from the earth in those spots interrupts the mental process. Maybe that's why so many people die back there."

"There was a road in Dallas like that," said Mark.

"There's a stretch of road up in the high desert near Victorville. They called it the dead zone before Stephen King ever wrote his novel of the same name."

They walked to a picnic table, away from the street.

"I wonder how everyone's doing?" mused Mark.

"God only knows," sighed Jerry, looking weary.

"How can something so wonderful and something so terrible be happening at the same time?" Mark thought aloud.

"You're in love with me, aren't you?" Jerry looked out over the L.A. Basin, following a huge 747 as it landed at LAX.

"Yes," Mark answered simply, almost in a whisper.

Jerry glanced at him, then continued looking at the panorama.

"You going to tell me that I shouldn't be?"

Jerry shook his head.

"Does it upset you?"

Jerry considered an answer, but it froze in his throat.

Mark sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Do you think this agent could really be part of the conspiracy?"

"Don't change the subject, damn it. I'm slow." Jerry smiled and flashed his green eyes, which the sun caught just right. "I'm . . . I'm sexually attracted to your mouth." He watched Mark's incredulous expression and laughed. "It intrigues me. I want to touch it and let you suck my fingers. I want your tongue all over my body. But your body . . . it does nothing for me. Does that make any sense?"

"No," said Mark flatly. "But then nothing makes any sense to me lately."

"I have no desire to touch you or fuck you in the ass. Certainly not to kiss you or suck your cock. So what kind of sexual attraction is there between us?"

"Beats the shit out of me," Mark said, pretending to yawn.

"But *spiritually,* now. Well, that's a whole different story."

Mark shook his head, delighting in Jerry's unpredictability.

"You *interest* me no end. I want to get inside your head and see life as you see it. I'm protective of you. I feel bonded with you, like you were my son." He cocked his

head and smiled. "Yeah, that close. I can love you very deeply that way."

Mark was dumbfounded.

"But is it enough for you?"

Mark walked around in a slow circle, then stood in front of Jerry. "My life has changed so drastically that I have no idea what I can live with or without. All I know is that I've never *ever* met a man remotely like you. You're addictive, potent . . . crazy." Mark looked deeper into Jerry's eyes than ever before, trying to see as much a possible, but all he saw was the reflection of himself. "Is part of you more than the whole of the second best man in the universe?" He sat next to Jerry again. "Must I have someone suck my cock? No. Must I have someone to hold me? Yes. Will I be able to sleep without you in the future? I doubt it."

Jerry looked at him compassionately.

"Can I walk away from you and look for someone better? No, I can't. You're like some ethereal, nurturing force field that has me hypnotized." Mark playfully bumped into the burly cop. "Without you, there would be an . . . an eternal eclipse. I can't think of anything more bleak."

"And what happens when you come to your senses?" asked Jerry, bumping him back.

Mark had no answer. There was a lingering doubt that he would live long enough to find out.

Jerry made the next call from a pay phone in front of a Circle K. He asked for Ron.

"Agent Maxwell," she answered.

"What's your answer?"

"Bring the witness here and we'll talk. My superior has to make the deal"

"No way."

"What, then?

"You and your supervisor can question him with me at a place and time I choose."

"He won't do that. Why should he trust you any more than you trust him?"

"Aw come on, lady, why would I want to hurt your supervisor? I'm the one who has his ass in a sling, for Christ's sake."

"If we get the witness' I.D. on the homicide detective, how do we tie in to Caiazza?"

"Jesus! Wiretaps, observation. Shit, the fuckers meet regularly and do *sieg heils* to each other!"

"I don't think we can get the authority. Either bring him in or we can't make the deal."

Jerry violently slammed the receiver onto the cradle, then got into the car to compose himself. Abruptly he got out of the car again and called Santoro at work.

Mark could see that Santoro was offering him even more bad news. Jerry's face was drawn, and he looked like he'd just been given a terminal diagnosis. Mark was sure that his own expression was basically the same.

Jerry slowly got into the car and slumped in the seat. "Santo lost her temper when she met with that gay group. She decked one of the dyke officers and had to hightail it." He handed a small piece of paper to Mark. "Here's where they're located in West Hollywood."

Jerry drove to the address on the paper, which turned out to be a gay and lesbian book store. "She said the group leaders are in an office in back. You stay here."

Mark laughed. "They won't let you back there! You look like the straight boogy man, dude."

"We'll see," said Jerry through clenched teeth.

Jerry walked into the store and saw a handful of people milling about, thumbing through books and magazines. A clerk was preoccupied with a customer in front. A young, bleach-blond man walked into the store from the door in back. He wore a T-shirt inscribed with "GALE—Fuck Yes, I'm A Fag." Jerry pretended to look at some books on the shelf next to the door and felt several pairs of eyes upon him. He looked up and caught the suspicious gaze of at least three men.

"Go for it," grumbled Jerry, as he walked through the door.

He saw a man in his thirties behind a desk, talking on the phone. The man glanced at Jerry and almost dropped the receiver. "I'll call you back, honey," he said with a highly theatrical voice. "Can I help you?" he asked with a bitchy inflection.

"Are you one of the leaders of GALE?"

"Who wants to know?"

Jerry walked toward him, which prompted the man to stand up, seemingly preparing for flight. "I need your help."

The man looked away, then back in an exaggerated double take. "Honey, if you're gay, I'm a unicorn."

Jerry took a deep breath to calm down. The word "honey" made his nostrils flare. "How do you know I'm not gay?"

"Uhh . . . " the man said. "Mister . . . ."

"Smith," Jerry answered flatly.

"I'm really sort of busy right now, and—"

"In return for your help, I can give you some information that'll help your cause."

"Wait a minute," the man said, narrowing his eyes. "Are you a friend of that black dyke who sent my assistant to the hospital?"

Jerry sensed that the man was about to call the police. He inched closer, keeping the man away from his telephone. "Did she tell you about what we need from you?"

"I wasn't here, but my assistant said that she was talking about that Zooloo killer."

"The man the police killed wasn't Zooloo, nor was the detective a partner in it. They're both two innocent, gay men, who've been framed. They need to have some public awareness. They both have potential alibis that can be substantiated if only an organization like yours gets out and starts making some noise. Everyone is afraid and no one's coming forward. There's a gross injustice going on here, and you can do something about it."

"Why don't *you* do something about it?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll call a news conference and everyone will come," Jerry said acidly.

The man smiled. "You're a cop, aren't you?"

Jerry hesitated, then nodded.

The man seemed to relax a bit. "I read about it in the papers, and the thing I remember the most is the fact that neither man was openly gay."

"So?"

"So we don't recognize closeted homosexuals as even *being* gay. They're traitors to the cause of gay rights."

Jerry was amazed. "Run that by me again." He took another step closer.

"The true gay and lesbian community consists of openly gay and lesbian people who choose *not* to hide in a closet. I have nothing but contempt for people who try to act straight and do nothing to help us end this oppression. They do nothing to help us with the problems of AIDS, gay bashing, getting gay rights legislation passed and all the other things that have to be done."

Jerry shook his head and looked down, unable to fathom how everything could go so wrong. "Well, I know the detective, and he never tried to act 'straight.' He lived a quiet life and knew that he would pay for it in spades if he called attention to himself. More than that, though, he believed that his sexuality was nobody's business. I know for a fact that he donated to AIDS organizations, and I'm pretty sure he gave plenty of his hard-earned money to gay rights legislation groups."

"That's not enough."

"Oh, *that's not enough*," mimicked Jerry. He knew that his increasingly menacing stare was intimidating the gay activist.

"No, it's not. I've seen practically all my friends die of AIDS. Some died in my arms. Had your gay cop friend got out and screamed in the streets like we did, maybe more people would have listened and done something. I've been almost beaten to death twice because I'm gay. I've been arrested eleven times in the past two years. I've become radicalized, like my brothers and sisters in ActUp and Queer Nation. Silence equals death, Mister Policeman. Silence equals *traitor."* He seemed very pleased with himself.

"Does this mean you won't help me?"

"No way, José, and if you don't get out in five seconds, I'll call the police."

Jerry smirked.

The man pursed his lips and dramatically picked up the receiver. He dialed 911.

Jerry snatched the receiver and tore it out of his hand. As the man pressed himself against the wall, Jerry jerked the telephone, breaking the connection box on the baseboard. Dropping the telephone at his feet, he said, "I really would like to break your goddamned neck, but I still need your help. So I'll leave you with this: *you're next*. The same people who framed my friend are just about ready to go for bigger game . . . and you're bigger game. When you least expect it, the big bad *real* world will fall down on your head, and you'll jump so far back into the closet that your friends will never find you." Jerry slowly turned and walked back into the bookstore, glancing back at the activist's face before he closed the door. The man's eyes were blank, his face pale. He looked like a man who had just had a terrible, ominous curse placed upon him.

Deeply depressed, Jerry walked to the car and saw that Mark wasn't there. He looked up and down that side of the street but couldn't see him. He looked up and down the other side of the street and still couldn't find him. A creeping, icy sense of panic drifted over Jerry like ice fog, and he wondered if he was going mad. He got into the car and gripped the steering wheel, completely at a loss over what to do next.

He scanned the street for cars with men sitting inside. He surveyed the store front signs on each side of the book store, wondering if Mark had gone into a store to buy something.

"That didn't take long," said Mark, sticking his head through the passenger window. He had come from behind.

Jerry was so startled that he almost jumped out of the car. "Jesus, where in the hell have you been?" Jerry shouted.

Mark got inside the car. "Paxton, is it you? You've grown muscles."

Jerry was ashen, causing Mark to feel concerned.

"I'm sorry," Mark offered. "I thought you'd be longer, so I went into this . . . " He turned around and pointed at a store front a couple of doors down. " . . . Astrological place. They do computerized services for astrologers and anyone else who's willing to pay the price."

Jerry began to calm down. "What did you get?" He started the car and began to drive to Cliff House.

"When I spotted the store, I remembered what you said about electromagnetic zones, so I bought these things called location charts. You give this outfit your birth information, and they plot a chart which shows all your important astrological zones, like where you're in danger and where you'll fall in love and where you might get rich."

Jerry chuckled. He was relieved that Mark was safe. "Do you really believe in that bull crap?"

"Well, let's take a look see." Mark opened the envelope and pulled out two eleven-by-seventeen inch world maps with vertical and curved diagonal lines plotted on it. "They explained some of it inside. Just took them five minutes to run these on the computer. Let's see. Uh, oh."

Jerry glanced at the chart and smiled.

"My Pluto line runs right over L.A."

"What does that mean?" asked Jerry. He was amused, yet amazed that an intelligent man could believe in such nonsense.

"Apparently it means that here is where I find total upheaval and change, where . . . where miracles can happen and . . ."

"What?"

"Something about firsts and lasts in life, the greatest risk of death. Jesus, this is weird."

"It's bull crap," mumbled Jerry.

"Let's see what you have over L.A." Mark pulled out another chart.

Jerry looked at him, surprised. "You had a chart made for me, too?"

"Yup," Mark said, reading it.

"But how . . . ?"

"I asked you all your birth information the other night when you were drunk and in bed with me."

Jerry's mouth fell open.

"You were born December twenty-seventh in thirty-three at six in the morning in Bergheim, Texas. You're a Capricorn and I'm a Cancer." Mark beamed at him. "That's very compatible, but we're both in the wrong place to reach our potential together."

Jerry shook his head forlornly. "Could you translate that, partner?"

"Ahah!" blurted Mark. "You have a Saturn line near L.A. Says here that, let's see . . . 'periods of want, deprivation, delay, disappointment, loneliness. The responsibilities and duties are overwhelming . . . .'" Mark was impressed with the charts.

"Bad zone, huh?" confirmed Jerry cynically.

"L.A.'s a very bad zone for both of us, big guy," said Mark seriously.

After consuming the last of the prepared gourmet meals, Jerry and Mark went out on the front deck overlooking the cliff. They sat in plush outdoor chairs and watched the sun set over the Pacific.

"Are you going to try to call Finnigan again?" asked Mark, breaking the spell of several minutes of silence.

Jerry considered the question. "I guess I should, shouldn't I?"

Mark was alarmed at Jerry's obvious depression and indecision. "Jerry?"

The detective eventually turned to him.

"Is this a no-win situation?"

Jerry shuddered. "I think it might be, son." He looked off into the sunset. "Just might be."

"When is your vacation over with?"

Jerry was surprised at the question. He calculated in his head. "Day after tomorrow." He looked at Mark, hoping he would have something to offer. "Why?"

"You go to work and they tell you that you've been retired. You sign your financial arrangements and have them mail your retirement checks to Texas. If it's a no-win situation, I don't see any more moves."

Jerry rubbed his big hands together and closed his eyes. "I'm a cop, Mark. I believe in justice." He looked up at the younger man. "Finnigan is in trouble. Anderson's in trouble. You and me, we're in trouble." He looked somberly at Mark. "I can't just walk away from this. Someone has to stop these motherfuckers." Jerry shuddered as bitter tears of rage and frustration burst from his eyes. "Never in my entire life have I ever felt this helpless . . . like somebody's chopped off my balls." He began to sob and buried his face in his hands.

Mark wanted to comfort Jerry, but could only stare at the big man in a daze. Somehow he sensed that no one could comfort Jerry—that the rare tears had to flow.

Later, they sat in the entertainment room listening again to the Kiri te Kanawa CD. While Jerry sat on the love seat, Mark sat on the floor, an arm draped over the big man's leg. At the beginning of Richard Strauss' last song, Jerry gently placed his hand upon Mark's shoulder.

FIFTEEN

The Following Morning

Just before daybreak, Mark was awakened by the sound of a closing door and walked upstairs to see about Jerry. Finding the bed empty, he panicked and ran into all the upstairs rooms, shouting for Jerry. He ran downstairs into the kitchen, then the entertainment room, followed by the pool area. He ran to the kitchen door and looked up at the driveway, where the car was parked. Noticing that the security system had been disengaged, he walked outside and found Jerry standing in the middle of the driveway, staring down toward the gate, a .45 pistol in his hand.

"Jerry?"

Jerry turned, startled. "Holy shit!" He laughed at his own reaction. "Boy, am I jumpy."

"Did you see something?"

Jerry glanced at the gate, then walked toward Mark. "Probably my overactive imagination. I thought I saw someone prowling around the house just before dawn."

Mark was alarmed. "What?"

"I thought it was the gardener, but then I realized that he only comes once a week." Jerry stuffed the pistol inside his belt. "So I got up and tried to find him from the windows upstairs. I must have been seeing things."

Mark became nervous and looked back at the kitchen door, which was wide open. "You shut the security system off!" He looked wildly at Jerry. "He could have gotten in while we were out here!"

"Relax," soothed Jerry. "I searched the entire grounds before I shut it off."

"Maybe he climbed over the fence."

Jerry shook his head. "Anyone touches that fence, an alarm goes off in the master bedroom and a television monitor goes on. Besides, the razor wire would cut an intruder to shreds. There's only one other way up here, and even a mountain goat couldn't pull that off."

"The cliff?" Mark walked back to the house and out to the front deck.

Jerry joined him as he was peering over the ledge.

Mark looked worried. "Jerry, a rock climber could make that in thirty minutes."

"Bull crap."

"I used to go rock climbing in Big Bend National Park

in Texas. That is no impossible climb."

Jerry looked over the ledge and fell back as be felt a slight vertigo.

Mark looked over the edge again and got down on his stomach, peering under a metal railing.

"What do you see?"

"I don't know," said Mark, inching forward until his chest was over the edge.

"What are you trying to do, get yourself killed?" protested Jerry, grabbing Mark's legs.

"Uh, oh."

"What?" asked Jerry, careful not to look over the edge.

Mark scrambled to his feet. He was frightened. "There's an eye bolt embedded in the rock right at the top of the cliff, just underneath the deck."

The two men rushed back inside the house and reset the alarm. They looked out on the deck from the living room.

"They were here," said Mark softly.

"Maybe not," reasoned Jerry. "That bolt could have been there for months."

"The hole and bolt both looked unweathered, Jerry."

Jerry became pensive and silent.

Mark turned and walked to the kitchen. "I'll make some breakfast."

Jerry followed him. "If it was Caiazza, they would have busted down the goddamn gate, done us in and gotten a mile away before the police came. No, it was someone else. Maybe a burglar."

Mark shrugged and got boxes of cereal down from the pantry. Jerry made coffee and turned on a small-screen color television on the breakfast bar. Mark pulled a carton of milk out of the refrigerator and gathered up two overripe bananas from a fruit bowl.

As the two men ate cereal, they watched the local Channel 4 news, both only pretending to hear what was being said. Each wanted the other to think that he was calm in spite of the fact that time was running out.

"And now we have an update on the shooting of those two policemen last night . . . ."

Jerry wondered what kind of man he'd become. During each crisis he'd ever experienced, he had reacted swiftly and decisively. *With balls,* he reminded himself.

"Jerry?"

But now, he felt castrated and frozen to one spot.

"Oh, my God, Jerry."

"What?" Jerry glanced at Mark, who was staring in horror at the television screen.

" . . . and police officials say that they've begun rounding up members of the radical group called GALE, or Gays and Lesbians Enraged. Witnesses say that a woman and a man dressed in GALE T-shirts rushed up to the detectives last night as they attempted to place a homicide suspect inside their unmarked squad car and opened fire at close range. Police theorize that the fugitive suspects might have been attempting to free the prisoner because he was a GALE member. Detective Kenzo Tsuda is currently undergoing surgery at Marionfield Medical Center in Hollywood after receiving two gunshot wounds to the head. Detective Ben Steele was shot once in the neck and is listed in stable condition at the same hospital. Once again, two L.A.P.D. homicide detectives were seriously wounded and one homicide suspect killed in an ambush in front of the West Hollywood sheriff's station late last night. We'll have more on this story as information is available."

Mark looked sadly at Jerry.

The lieutenant's expression was blank as he stared at the television set. Eventually he looked down at his cereal and ate slowly. Finished, he got up and walked to the study upstairs.

When Mark got there, Jerry had already called Finnigan's number at the homicide division.

Mark watched the monitor and gave a thumbs up as the light stayed green.

"Finnigan." It was a small, terrified voice.

"Can you talk?" asked Jerry.

"You tell me."

"It's green. I just heard about Kenzo and Steele . . . I'm afraid they'll try to get you."

"Well, if they do, they'd better be quick and smart, because I'm packing a forty-five with dumdums in the clip. I'm not even staying with the old lady."

"Just stay alert, okay? Look, we struck out on GALE. I'm sure they wish they'd listened to me now. How did you do with the ACLU?"

"Zero. They thought I was crazy."

"Looks like it's the FBI, then."

"Will they buy it?"

"They want our boy here for another artist rendering and protective custody— unconditionally." He turned to look at Mark sadly. "I suppose we'll have to do it now."

Mark nodded bravely.

"You really think you can trust them?"

"I don't know. Caiazza's got high level friends, so he could've infiltrated even the FBI. But it's either go that route or run and hide."

"Which is what I'm about to do," announced Finnigan. "Mingus has been out sick since yesterday at noon, so I went over his head and got vacation time approval from Captain Morton. I'm leaving town for a week with Shelby." He was silent for a moment. "Jer?"

"Yeah."

"I might not come back."

"You have to, Finn. You're too good a cop to run away. Just like me."

"Cryder just came in, so I'll have to slip out. Gotta go."

Jerry held down the switch hook and looked dolefully at Mark. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. Let's put this to bed. Otherwise, we'll never be able to live with ourselves."

Jerry dialed the number for the FBI and asked for Maxwell. The operator transferred Jerry to Maxwell's mobile phone.

"Maxwell."

"This is Zeitler. I've decided to do it your way."

"I figured you'd call after I heard about the shootings. Something stinks at Hollywood/Wilshire. You know, we could put you into protective custody, too."

"No, I have some things to do yet."

"Suit yourself then."

"When do you want him?"

"Tomorrow morning about eight. I have to get it all set up. My office is on the fifteenth floor, room fifteen-sixty. We'll keep him in a safe house and get the artist set up, plus the computer time for the composites."

"We'll see you tomorrow at eight." Jerry hung up.

Mark smiled wanly. "Well, at least we have one more day together."

Jerry affectionately placed his thick arm around the younger man's neck. "You name it, then, partner. We'll spend the day doing exactly what you want to do."

Jerry drove to Malibu, where they had lunch in an intimate Indonesian seafood restaurant on the beach. Both men's entrées were fiery hot, and only ample quantities of cold Japanese beer could sooth the burning.

"Do you feel as changed as I do?" asked Mark.

Jerry considered his answer. "I don't know if 'changed' is the right word for me. I feel different, but I think I feel something surfacing that was probably there all the time. I guess I feel confused. I really don't know what or who I am any more."

Mark chuckled. "Don't tell me that you're worried about turning gay."

Jerry shook his head convincingly. "Not in the least. In the past few days, between having sex with you and talking to that creep at GALE, I'm beginning to think that there's no such thing as a sexual *gay*. It's a political thing now. Sexuality is way too complex to categorize. It's like a rainbow; the yellow fades into orange, then red, then purple and so on. And say I'm on the spectrum somewhere between yellow and orange, what's to say that I won't get in the mood to be blue-green, huh?"

Mark was impressed.

"I believe that two people can love one another for spiritual reasons and that they can learn to have some kind of sex with each other . . . and truly respect and care for one another, even if the sex seems alien. Maybe it's as simple as learning to eat sushi. But had I been seduced by someone other than a guy like you, I probably *would've* detested myself. I probably would've driven the memory from my mind, like I did with Glenn."

Mark's eyes widened. "Who's Glenn?"

Jerry laughed and related the story of his first male-to-male experience with his neighbor.

Mark felt a twinge of jealously over the fact that he'd not been the first one.

Jerry sensed Mark's reaction and realized that his new friend wasn't so terribly mature in all categories. "I really don't think that I've been 'brought out,' or anything like that. I just don't see myself as a homosexual—or a bisexual, for that matter. I'm a complex man, capable of loving someone who truly loves me, whether that person is male or female. I'm fifty-seven, so I can say that with conviction." He winked. "Like you suggested, I'm sexually eclectic."

After lunch, they drove to a public beach and parked. Slipping into bathing suits inside a toilet adjacent to the parking lot, they began strolling the near-deserted beach together.

"Have I changed that much?" asked Mark.

Jerry lazily looked at him and picked up a small rock. "I suppose you have. When I first met you at Tom Thornton's apartment, you seemed arrogant in a way, like all those militant leftist types." Jerry smiled and threw the rock at the surf. He became serious. "Was that really you or was it because of the experience of finding a headless corpse?"

Mark stopped and faced the ocean, watching a couple of surfers toy with the small waves. "It was the experience, I guess. I'm not a militant type. Oh, when I first came here I felt 'proud' a couple of times, especially during Gay Pride Week, but it all seemed so silly in retrospect, so hollow. I realized then that I didn't want to be a separatist like all those others. They gave up on trying to live among the mainstream and trying to educate through example. And when they came up with adopting the word 'queer,' I turned completely away from the gay movement." He studied Jerry's reaction to what he was saying. "I'm a lot like you when it comes to sexuality. The lines are blurred. All along, I've gone after men who don't have the gay mannerisms, regardless of how subtle. That repulses me. Consequently, I've spent most of my adult life seducing straight men."

Jerry smiled. "You're good at it, I can tell you that."

"The down side is that my sexual experiences have been few and far between."

"Down side?" protested Jerry.

"Okay," Mark said, reading Jerry's thoughts. "As far as I know, I've never been in contact with the HIV virus because of it. That's an *up side,* isn't it?"

"Are you a conservative in politics?"

"No, not really." Mark considered his politics. "Moderate is more what I am. I'm a liberal in a lot of ways. I never understood why the typical white man couldn't walk in the black man's shoes, why he couldn't imagine being born black in an impoverished area of, say, Detroit or Chicago. And when I came here, I saw the utter hopelessness of the kids in the Latin barrios and said to myself, 'Hey, Mark, what if you'd been born here and your name was Rodriguez?' When I think that way, I usually don't place too much importance on the rejection by my family. I could still get a good job because I was white and 'presentable.'"

"So where is the conservative balance?" asked Jerry, focusing past Mark to the parking lot, where a muscular young man with shoulder-length hair was leaning against

the hood of an old blue Plymouth Duster, glancing at them, then looking out to sea. The man appeared to be around thirty and was wearing a yellow shirt with jeans and sneakers. *He doesn't look like a skinhead*, Jerry decided.

"I don't buy this gay rights shit that much." Mark followed Jerry's gaze, but because Jerry didn't seem concerned, he didn't either. "I don't want to adopt children, and I think that marriage is a farce anyway, whether straight or gay. That institution was probably dreamed up in a conspiracy between the church and lawyers. The church gets all the money from the marriages, and the lawyers get all the money from the divorces."

Jerry laughed, glancing once more at the young man in the yellow shirt before dismissing him from his mind.

"Most of all, though, I don't believe in wearing some uniform or symbol to tell everyone around me what my sexual preference is. You know what really gets me? It's when these radical types become outraged over the expression, 'straight-acting.' You see the expression in personal ads all the time. I get a kick out of both the stupidity of the expression and the gay community's reaction to it. To me, *straight-acting* is like whistling at women and pretending to lust over every good-looking woman that walks by. What these advertisers really mean is 'non-gay-acting,' which is the opposite of gay-acting. And, of course, gay-acting is, in fact, an act. It's an adopted, as opposed to natural, behavior."

"What about effeminate men?" questioned Jerry, thinking of Mark's pianist friend, Paxton.

"Natural effeminacy doesn't make a sexual statement. I knew a guy like Paxton in college and everyone labeled him gay because he was effeminate. Fact was, though, he loved women so much that he wanted to emulate them and serve them. Can't get any straighter than that." Mark looked back and saw that the young man and his blue car were gone. "What they should say is *asexual*-acting, which is the way most people on this planet act."

"Sounds reasonable." Jerry knew that Mark was rambling nervously.

Mark's mood darkened. "Jerry? What are they going to do with me?"

Jerry picked up a discarded rubber ball and threw it up in the air, positioning himself to catch it. "They'll probably . . . " He caught the ball and looked with concern at Mark. "They'll place you in some safe house somewhere and let you and the artist have at it for a few hours. They'll have agents around you night and day until the composites come back. If you I.D. Cryder and they can come up with enough evidence to make a case, they'll hold on to you for awhile until they can make a case on everyone else involved."

"How long?"

Jerry shrugged.

"Why can't you come with me? You're in just as much danger as I am, probably."

"No." Jerry's expression turned grim. "I have some things to take care of first . . . just in case the FBI can't make an I.D. and they drop you."

"But in that case, I'm no threat to Caiazza. They won't hurt me then, will they?"

"I know it was Cryder," said Jerry, throwing the ball up again. "I'd bet my life on it."

Mark watched as the still powerfully built man stretched his arms out to catch the ball. His chest hair looked so warm and inviting. His heavily muscled arms assured comfort and protection from a hostile world. Anguish surged through Mark's throat as he shouted, "I don't want to lose you, goddamnit! How can we protect each other if I'm locked in a fucking safe house?"

Jerry looked at him with alarm. It was the first time he'd seen Mark upset and angry. Ignoring two surfers walking toward the beach from the street above, Jerry put his arm over Mark's shoulders. "You won't lose me, Mark."

Mark's eyes misted over again. "I hate this fucking place. It's evil. I want you and me to get out of this . . . zone . . . this evil zone."

Jerry turned Mark around and they headed back toward the car. Noticing that the surfers were staring at them, Jerry self-consciously withdrew his arm from Mark's shoulders, then stared back until the surfers turned their attention to the waves.

As they reached the men's room, Mark took the keys Jerry extended.

"I have to hurry up and piss. You get the clothes."

While Mark walked the half block to the car, Jerry walked into the men's room and began to urinate. Shortly he heard footfalls and glanced back. The footsteps stopped, and Jerry could see the blur of yellow as someone stepped into a stall adjacent to the urinal trough. Realizing he'd not heard the booth door close, Jerry tensed, cutting off his flow of urine. He slipped his cock back inside his bathing suit and slowly knelt to see where the man stood. He saw a pair of sneakers facing at an angle to the commode. *A strange position to be pissing or shitting in*, thought Jerry. It occurred that perhaps the man was cruising him, but his instincts told him otherwise. He stood up, wondering how to handle the threat without his pistol.

Jerry heard running footsteps and the sounds of young voices. Suddenly the room was abuzz with four teenage boys, who began to change into wet suits. Jerry rushed toward the booth just as the stall door slammed and locked, then ran outside, meeting Mark halfway between the car and the men's room. He gestured for Mark to hurry back to the car, then jumped in and quickly started the car. He drove to the other side of the men's room and parked behind a van.

"What's going on?" asked Mark, shivering at the sight of foreboding in Jerry's eyes.

Jerry ignored the question and slipped out of the car with his .45, peering around the van toward the toilet.

Soon the man with the yellow shirt came out and anxiously looked up and down the parking lot. Jerry pulled back and watched him through the van's tinted windows.

The young man bolted for his car and screeched out of the parking lot, only to slam on his brakes as he saw Jerry behind the van.

The two men stared at each other, then the young man glanced down at Jerry's pistol and smiled. He slowly drove away.

Jerry got back inside the car. "Did you recognize him?"

Mark shook his head.

"I wonder if he's a rock climber?"

"You get his license number?"

"But of course," said Jerry in an exaggerated French accent. "Got a quarter and pencil and paper?"

Mark nodded and handed him a coin, then pulled a pen and the rental contract out of the glove compartment.

Jerry rushed to a nearby pay phone and dialed a number. After giving his badge number and code word, he was told that the car was registered to a Robert Parker at a Hollywood address.

Jerry drove by the apartment building slowly. "Eight twenty, right?"

Mark looked at Jerry's scribbling on the back of the rental contract. "Right. Apartment number twenty-one ."

"I'll bet that's the one. First one on the second floor." Jerry looked up at what appeared to be a dark living room window. "See the blue Duster anywhere?"

"No," said Mark, looking up and down the street.

"One more pass," mumbled Jerry, driving fast around the block.

Reaching the apartment building again, Jerry pulled the car to the curb and got out.

"What are you going to do?" Mark opened his door.

"Stay put," ordered Jerry. "I just want to take a quick look."

Mark looked up and down the street with concern.

Jerry walked past the complex office and looked up at the number on the apartment. "Bingo," he whispered to himself as he read "21."

"Can I help you?" It was a man's voice from behind.

Jerry turned and saw a young man with a long blond pony tail. He'd apparently just come out of the office.

"Looking for a man by the name of Parker." Jerry glanced up at the apartment. "I think he lives in twenty-one."

The young man shook his head. "Not any more. He moved a couple of days ago." He studied Jerry. "You a cop, too?"

"Cops were here?" Jerry was dumbfounded.

"Yeah, several times." He squinted at Jerry, shielding his face from the sun. "What'd he do, anyway. The detectives wouldn't tell me."

"What kind of detectives? What'd they look like?"

The young man crossed his arms. "I asked if you were a cop."

Jerry flashed his wallet and badge.

The young man studied it closely. "Homicide, huh? So were the other dudes, man. One looked like he was about half dead and the other was a mean-looking motherfucker with a bandaged hand."

Jerry felt dizzy and began to walk away. "Thanks." Suddenly, Jerry remembered something else. "Oh, one other thing. Did Parker ever do any rock climbing?"

"He did everything, man. Sky diving, scuba diving, rock climbing, motor cycle racing. He had the biggest fucking Harley I ever saw. Lived on the edge, man."

Jerry nodded and walked to the car.

After purchasing a cheap but effective motion sensor at a nearby Radio Shack, Jerry took a circuitous route back to Cliff House, stopping often to make sure that they were not being followed by the blue Duster. Jerry related everything the young man had said, but neither could figure out what was going on.

As Mark installed the motion detector under the edge of the front deck, Jerry placed the monitor in the downstairs bedroom, signifying that he was planning on sleeping with Mark. When Mark realized where the monitor had been installed, he pretended not to notice, sending Jerry to the bar, shaking his head.

While Jerry sipped sherry and watched from the breakfast bar, Mark defrosted two thick sirloin steaks and pulled a bag of mixed frozen vegetables from the freezer.

The sherry helped numb his sense of utter helplessness, allowing Jerry to toy with the fantasy of living with someone as compatible as Mark. "Our hostess is going to be royally pissed when she comes back and finds all her fancy foods gone," Jerry predicted.

Mark glanced at the television, then at the wall clock, which showed that it was nearly six o'clock. "You want to hear the latest on Kenzo and Steele?"

Jerry stared at the television set and nodded sadly. He reluctantly turned it on.

As expected, the big story was the shooting of the detectives and the chaos that had ensued. Jerry and Mark were relieved to hear that the detectives would both live. Police had arrested a lesbian and a gay man for the shootings, but Jerry suspected that they had probably been nowhere near the shooting site. Both were members of GALE and were paraded before the television cameras while a news anchorman described the organization as a "militant gay and lesbian fringe group, intent upon violence and terrorism." Footage of a demonstration by several gay and lesbian groups appeared. Hundreds of young men and women had massed in front of city hall when police suddenly began attacking the group with nightsticks. Jerry recognized the man he'd talked to behind the bookstore. He was being arrested and was bleeding about the head.

And then Jerry found himself looking into the cold, emotionless eyes of Mingus as he was being interviewed.

"We have reason to believe that this was part of a conspiracy by the group called 'Gays and Lesbians Enraged' and we expect to make more arrests." Mingus blinked dreamily, like someone on pain medication.

"Sheriff's SWAT team and bomb squad units have raided their headquarters in West Hollywood and have found explosives and detonation devices, along with an arsenal of automatic weapons."

Jerry knew that, somehow, he would have to confront Mingus. He wondered to himself if he was able to kill someone like Mingus in cold blood and was surprised to find the answer so readily available in his head: *yes*. He turned off the television set.

"There's no such thing as 'gay terrorism,' Jerry. How can this be happening?" asked Mark, absently taking the steaks out of the microwave and placing them inside a broiler pan. "Every now and then, you hear of sporadic injustices, but this is so . . . *wholesale*. How can they get by with it?"

"They won't," Jerry said simply, watching as Mark placed the vegetables in a saucepan and added water from the tap.

After eating, showering and getting into a fresh pair of silk robes, they retired into the entertainment room with snifters filled with fine Spanish brandy.

"What's that other music you told me about. You know, the Japanese guy."

"Kitaro," remembered Mark. "'Silk Road Two' is the name of the album. It's really sexy."

"Put it on." Jerry stretched, undoing his robe, showing Mark that he needed little impetus from music.

Mark found the CD and started it. He looked down at Jerry and felt a host of emotions, some exciting, some disturbing. Of course, he wanted to take Jerry again and again, but he felt a stronger need to just hold on to him, to cherish him. Mark undid his robe and pressed his torso against Jerry's, burying the side of his face in the abundance of chest hair.

Jerry completed the mood by wrapping his arms around Mark and holding tightly. The same conflicting emotions haunted him, too, only his were more complex. He also felt compelled to give more of himself to Mark this time. He had to reciprocate in some fashion and allowed his free spirit to search for a way. Barriers had to come down. It would be like riding a Ferris wheel, soaring up to the *yin*, discovering it, then coming back down to the *yang*, that familiar territory ruled by testosterone. *Nothing to fear. Up and back down. Up to see what it is; down to keep it from getting out of hand. Up and do it, then down and fuck Mark's sweet lips. Unload my cum for him. Oh, Lord, how he loves my juice and how I love giving it to him. Up. Up, first, then down.* "Mark?"

Mark lifted his head and looked into Jerry's concerned expression. "What?"

"Were you tested for HIV?"

"Yes. Twice. I had sex with this really masculine married guy, and then I found out he was getting fucked all the time. Why?"

"Were you ever fucked in the ass?"

Mark wondered what Jerry was getting at. "About ten years ago with a married man. I don't enjoy it. Why?" Mark studied the mix of mischievousness and dread in Jerry's eyes. "And, except for you, I haven't taken a man's load in my mouth—let alone swallow it—in about the same period of time. I vowed to reserve the swallowing for minotaurs . . . like you . . . and they don't come along too often in a lifetime."

Jerry paused and weighed whether or not he wanted to go through with it. He did. "Before I showered," Jerry finally said, "I cleaned myself out with Lydia's enema contraption upstairs. She's into anal sex. I want you to massage my ass and prostate."

Mark gulped. "Are you serious?"

"Work with me here, Mark," Jerry said. "This is really taking a lot of balls on my part. Just do what I ask and don't break the spell." He patiently smiled. "Okay?"

Mark nodded, determined not to speak again.

"There's some lubricant in the bathroom, I think."

Mark found the jar and a towel, then returned to find Jerry lying on the floor on top of his robe. Mark looked dumbfounded at the man he so desperately wanted. He wondered if there really was a limit to what a human being can harbor in his psyche.

"Now suck me and get me as hot as a firecracker. Then massage my ass and stretch it a little."

Mark felt his heart thumping as he voraciously took Jerry's pre-cum-covered cock into his mouth, using a slow and richly slick technique. *Is it my imagination, or is he discharging more pre-cum? Is he shivering more?*

Jerry's hands massaged Mark's shoulders as his hips gyrated. "Massage me, Baby," he whispered.

Upon hearing the word "Baby," Mark's eyes opened widely. *Baby?* His own cock was throbbing in anticipation for . . . *what?* He gently probed Jerry's sphincter with a slick index finger and found it as tight as a small, black rubber cock ring.

"Easy," whispered Jerry, pushing Mark's lips away from his turgid cock. "Too close."

Mark took the opportunity to watch his finger invading the sanctity of Jerry's rectum, gently massaging, tenderly coaxing it to blossom and reveal its pinkness. He dipped a second finger into the jar and carefully slid the two fingers past the sphincters, stretching them for the first time. *Push a little,* Mark silently urged. Feeling a slight loosening, Mark pressed deeper, swirling his fingers around the inside.

"Suck me some more," Jerry directed, gyrating his pelvis more, his lips parting in obvious pleasure.

Mark took the throbbing penis again, wedging it deep within his throat as he greased a third finger and insidiously escalated his probe. Again, Jerry pushed Mark's mouth away and again, he relaxed more. Mark soon realized that Jerry was fully dilated.

Jerry felt as if a transcendental sieve had swept through him, freeing him from gravity, pain and fear. "I want you to fuck me, Mark." Jerry said it without opening his eyes. The tone of his voice seemed to indicate that

there should be no protest, that Mark should just do it.

Mark gently turned the big man over on his side and placed a glob of lubricant upon his bare cock with his free hand. Pulling four fingers out of Jerry's rectum, Mark deftly guided his ample cock into the virgin cavity. Feeling little resistance, he cautiously probed deeper until his entire length was embedded. He wrapped his arms around Jerry and sent his fingers combing through the mat of chest hair in search of nipples to squeeze. He kissed the back of Jerry's neck and licked over the silver-haired back, moaning as the impact of what he was doing hit him. But it was much too much for him to control. "Oh, Jerry, I can't hold back. Baby, I can't hold back!"

Mark pulled out and pressed his quaking crotch against Jerry's swollen, equally slick penis. Slurping sounds swirled about them. He glanced at Jerry's face and saw the look of rapture, the tongue eager to probe. Unable to resist, Mark kissed his lover for the first time, reluctantly pulling back, going for more as Jerry's tongue lured him. Their tongues writhed about one another, tracing gum lines, stretching for out-of-reach uvulas.

Both men cried out, filling the room with an atonal accompaniment to Kitaro. They rolled with abandon over the carpeting, grunting, thrusting, grinding into one another. Their prostates finally spent, they rolled to a stop on their sides and held one another tightly, softly moaning into each other's ear.

As Mark lay glowing in Jerry's arms, Jerry envisioned himself floating upon a lilting pond of liquid rapture. Both men fell asleep with visions of the Texas Hill Country flashing in their minds.

When Mark awakened, he looked at the clock and realized that they had slept for over twenty minutes while locked in an embrace. "Let's shower," he softly whispered.

Jerry stirred and opened his eyes. Instead of letting go, he smiled and closed his eyes again, drawing Mark closer. "I thought I had it figured out, but I guess I didn't."

"What?" Mark was deliriously happy.

"I was just going to go up to the *yin* and hurry back to the *yang,"* Jerry said, laughing.

"You lost me," said Mark dreamily.

"When I know how, I'll explain it to you."

They showered together, each scrubbing the frothy slime off the other's belly. As Mark lathered up Jerry's back, he wrapped his arms around him and held him close.

Jerry held his arms over Mark's hands and closed his eyes, transmigrating them both to a farm in Texas, willing the nightmare over.

At just past two in the morning, the motion alarm on the deck was triggered. Jerry slipped from Mark's grasp and got out of bed. Hurrying into his robe, he grabbed his .45 and quietly interrupted the security system. He eased through the sliding glass door and out onto a portion of the curving deck which was out of sight from the cliff. The moon was four days from being full and Jerry could see well in the darkness. Cat-like, he crept around the curve of the house and stared at that part of the deck vulnerable to rock climbers.

He heard the gasp of someone straining. *Climbing?* He looked through the cracks in the deck at the far edge and saw the silhouette of someone climbing over the precipice of the cliff. He briefly scanned the driveway and the gate down the hill but could see no other intruders.

As a hand reached over the top of the deck, Jerry silently moved closer and ground the barrel of his pistol into the hand. He heard a man's cry and fell to knees, blindly reaching under the last railing to grab hair or clothing. But the intruder had already fallen several feet and was hanging by a safety rope.

"Hold it right there," ordered Jerry, pointing the pistol at him.

The man ignored Jerry's threat and skillfully lowered himself down into the darkness.

Knowing that shots would bring the local police, Jerry held off firing. Instead he lay on the deck and listened as the man reached the bottom and scurried off into the dense underbrush. Somehow, he knew that the intruder wasn't one of Caiazza's men. *But who is he?* Jerry slipped into bed with Mark, who had slept through the whole adventure.

SIXTEEN

The Following Morning

Jerry escorted Mark to the FBI headquarters, where they were met by Agent Maxwell, a wiry blonde with doe-like blue eyes. Looking more like a housewife than a crack special agent, Maxwell did nothing to allay the second thoughts both Jerry and Mark shared.

"I couldn't tell you before, Jerry," she said softly, "but I was Lieutenant Ross' source on the Caiazza investigation. I know about the surveillance van and how you both tried to handle this by yourselves."

Jerry sensed that more bad news was imminent. "Last I heard, he was ill . . . but I somehow don't believe it."

Maxwell looked down. "They say he shot himself in the head."

Jerry nodded, gulping back a wail of agony.

"Are you sure you don't want protection?" she asked Jerry.

"No," said Jerry softly. Unable to look Mark in the eyes, he turned and walked away.

As Jerry disappeared through the doorway, Mark felt the icy bleakness of a world without Jerry. They had changed and moved each other and committed themselves to each other's karma. At that moment, Mark vowed to survive and knew that Jerry had undoubtedly vowed the same.

Jerry turned the car in at Burbank airport and drove his squad car to his apartment. As he expected, there was a

car parked across the street from his unit. He recognized a third grade vice detective pal of Mingus, but pretended not to see him. Also as expected, he found his apartment ransacked. And then it dawned on him that Lydia had once written to him, reiterating her offer of the use of Cliff House while she was out of the country.

"Oh, shit," he spat, running to a drawer in the kitchen where he kept all reminder notes and business cards. Incredibly, the drawer had not been touched and he found the letter undisturbed. *So you're fallible, Caiazza, aren't you? Had you found this, you could have gotten rid of the both of us and been completely out of the woods.*

He sat weakly in a chair at his dining room table, feeling nauseated over his stupidity and by the odor of his closed-up apartment. "You must have a guardian angel, man," he said to himself.

Parking the squad car inside the division lot, he psyched himself up for a great acting job and strode into the homicide offices. He stood just inside the entrance to the bull pen and heard the room fall silent. A glance at Finnigan's cleared desk confirmed that he was gone. Santoro's desk was occupied by a young man with a crew cut and a smirk. Kenzo and Steele's desks were empty. Both Cryder and Reba were gone, and he assumed that they had been conveniently made partners. Ginger, his secretary, was gone, replaced by a young redhead. Jerry tried to meet the eyes of all the other personnel he'd supervised or known for the last few years, but all of them looked toward Jerry's old office, now occupied by a leering, pale Mingus.

Jerry slowly walked to the office and closed the door behind him. "What's going on?"

"What does it look like?" Mingus stretched his thin, hard lips in a rare smile and lit up a cigarette, something he hadn't been allowed to do when it was Jerry's office. The room was in shambles, and papers had been strewn all over. The room reeked of stale cigarette smoke. "I recommend that you go see Captain Morton. I think he has some retirement papers for you to sign." Mingus coughed up loose phlegm and spat it into a waste basket.

"You don't look too good," Jerry observed coolly.

"Neither do you," Mingus snapped, wheezing, as if trying to suppress a cough. He looked down at a report he was reading, essentially dismissing Jerry.

"I warned you about those cigarettes, Mingus," said Jerry, chuckling. "Sounds like lung cancer to me."

Mingus glared up at him, then succumbed to a coughing spasm.

Jerry turned and walked out, noticing that some of the old timer female employees had begun to cry silently. Jerry winked at those he knew and held a thumb up. As Mingus began to cough more violently, Jerry left.

Knowing that Captain Morton was a coward, Jerry wasn't surprised that he had taken a day off and delegated Jerry's retirement processing to his secretary. She was strangely silent and seemed terrified. *This from a woman who used to love to suck my dick*, he thought, chuckling. Jerry took his papers down to the personnel office to get his exit interview taken care off and was given several options on how he could be paid his pension. After surrendering his service revolver, identification and badge, he was commended for his years of service by some too-young lieutenant and escorted to the door.

But instead of leaving, he took an elevator up to Deputy Chief Caiazza's office and walked up to his secretary.

"Yes?" a bored young woman asked. She was in her twenties and wore black nail polish.

"Uhh . . . I'm retiring and I'd like to say good-bye to my old boss, Chief Caiazza."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Tell him Jerry Zeitler is here to see him."

She pressed an intercom and announced that a Jerry Zeitler was there. An inner office door opened and Caiazza stared awestruck at Jerry. He was in his early sixties, with well-groomed white hair. His uniform was spotless, the brass shiny. His eyes were almost black and as cold as a winter night.

"You want to see me?" Caiazza glanced at Jerry's torso, ostensibly for evidence of a gun.

"I just got checked out," Jerry said, confirming that he was unarmed.

"Come in," Caiazza offered reluctantly.

Jerry sat down in a chair opposite the chief's desk. The office was tastefully decorated, but Jerry wasn't surprised. He'd read countless profiles on fascist extremists and could see how typical Caiazza was. "Why was I railroaded out like this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," came the too-quick reply.

"Morton is out," Jerry blurted, " so I know it wasn't his idea. He couldn't face me."

"On the contrary, it was Captain Morton's idea exclusively." His eyes sparkled with hate. "He told me that you had become totally incompetent. You took it upon yourself to hide a witness without telling anyone else, and come to find out, you were chasing the wrong leads anyway. Of all people to solve the case, it turns out to be the man you practically demoted. He also said that you'd completely demoralized your division."

Jerry smiled as he envisioned putting a bullet through Caiazza's brain. He allowed himself to visualize slicing off the man's prick and stuffing it inside his mouth. *Another serial killer! they'd all scream,* he thought. "I've done my homework on you, you slimy fuck." *Not too much, Jer. Easy, just go so far. Make him make a mistake.* "I've always been told to go in, look around, then get something on the assholes right away, before they can stick a knife in your back."

"Get out," Caiazza ordered.

"I know your goons will be following me," continued Jerry, barely able to control the tone of his voice. "Maybe

they'll even try to take me out, although that would be mighty stupid. The bottom line, you see, is that someone's watching you, too."

"You've got nothing, Jerry." The deputy chief leered like Mingus did earlier. "You and your fag witness that couldn't even come close to a valid description. Zooloo wasn't even remotely close to the drawing."

"There are other artists, dick head," said Jerry. *Too much. Leave before you give it all away. Aw fuck him. Let him sweat it out.*

Caiazza frowned, then glowered at Jerry as he walked out the office.

Jerry walked the four blocks to a Hertz car rental agency and rented a white Buick Regal. Knowing that he was being followed, he drove to the Bonaventure Hotel and gave the car to the valet. He strode inside and slipped past the registration desk to an escalator leading up to offices and restaurants. He half turned and watched as two young skinheads rushed to get on an elevator half-filled with baggage, bell boys and guests. As Jerry reached the fourth level, he looked out over the cavernous panorama of fountains, hanging plants and myriad walkways. On the second level, the two young men pushed their way off the elevator and ran down a circular stairway to the lobby level. By the time they reached the lobby area, a bus load of tourists were clogging the front entrance. Jerry chuckled to himself and slipped out via an elevated walkway to an office building across the street. In less than ten minutes, he was four blocks away, renting a Lincoln Town Car at an Avis rental agency.

Having stopped off at his bank to withdraw two thousand dollars, Jerry used a cash deposit to check into the huge Holiday Inn in Glendale under an assumed name. He called Maxwell and warned her not to underestimate Caiazza's connections; Maxwell told him that Mark was okay and had collaborated with the artist for a very good drawing. Jerry gave her his location and room number and told her to call him the minute Mark was free to go.

As he stared out over a busy freeway nearby, he suddenly thought of Renfro, yet another who owed him a favor.

As Jerry parked the Town Car in front of a run-down bar in North Long Beach, several older black men were hanging out on the street, looking suspiciously at him. Jerry knew that they would figure he was Mafia and give him a wide berth. Of course, he played the part by conjuring the most savage expression he could muster.

Jerry walked into the noisy blues bar, and everyone fell silent. It tickled him that he was having that effect on crowds of people. *God, I'm a mean-looking sonofabitch!*

A burly, grey-haired black man in the back looked up to see what was wrong and spotted Jerry. "Hey, you white motherfucker! Get out of my goddamn bar, man!" He laughed robustly.

The lieutenant smiled and headed toward the back, prompting the bar to return to normal.

Renfro extended a wide, strong hand and shook Jerry's hand. "I can't remember the last time I saw you, man. When was it?"

"Oh, about two years ago."

"Holy shit, man," said Renfro, embarrassed. "You probably thought I'd forgotten what you did for me. I ain't called you or nothin'." He gestured for Jerry to sit and closed the door to his small office. "So what brings you to this bad-assed neck of the woods, man?"

"I need that favor you owe me."

Renfro sat up in his chair. "Name it, Jerry. You saved me from fryin', man, and I ain't ever forgot. Name it, Jerry."

"I just got booted out. They retired me." He looked around the tiny office, wondering if Renfro was even in a position to help him. "You look like you're clean for a change."

"As clean as I can be in this fuckin' hell hole. Name it, Jerry."

"I need a piece with a lot of stopping power. I have the cash."

Renfro nodded without hesitation. "Let me make a couple of calls, man. I'll get you something within the hour."

Mark had no idea where he was. All he knew was that the house was in a residential neighborhood and was a good hour's drive southeast of Los Angeles. He sat on an uncomfortable couch watching a summer sitcom rerun on television. Next to him sat his assigned four-to-twelve watch, a young agent by the name of Carpenter. Mark had spent most of the day working with the FBI artist, who was less talented than the one in Jerry's group.

Carpenter tore open a large bag of potato chips and offered Mark some.

"No thanks," Mark said, wondering what Jerry was doing and if he was safe. He had never felt so miserable in his life.

The telephone rang and Carpenter got up to answer it. "Yeah." He turned and looked at Mark. "Oh, that's too bad." He looked at the television program. "Uh huh. Yeah. You got it. Sure." He hung up the telephone and rejoined Mark.

"Well?"

"Oh." The agent finished chewing a handful of potato chips and shrugged. "That was Maxwell's assistant. He said that there's been a snag on the drawing. You'll have to do it again tomorrow."

"What?" yelled Mark, jumping to his feet.

The agent was startled. "Our computer was down, so they took it to L.A.P.D.'s computer for processing and someone lost the stupid thing."

The hairs on Mark's head felt like they were standing on end. "Oh, my God."

"What's wrong?"

"I have to talk to Maxwell." Mark hurried to the

telephone and picked up the receiver. "What's her number?"

"Hey, I can't give you her number, man. What the hell do you want to talk to her about anyway?"

"I did this once before, Carpenter, over at L.A.P.D. The same thing happened."

"What?" The agent was confused.

Mark lost his temper and his voice lowered a good octave. "Give me her number. She's about to blow the case and lose her fucking job."

Carpenter seemed to ponder what he should do, eventually deciding to give Mark the number.

Mark hurriedly dialed the number, listening to eight rings before a man finally answered.

"Maxwell's office."

"I need to talk to her quick. It's an emergency."

The man on the other end seemed to hesitate, then said, "Wait a minute. She just walked out. I'll try to catch her."

Mark gripped the receiver, his heart racing as adrenaline surged through his system.

"I'm going outside to check on my partner. Stay in here," said Carpenter, leaving the living room.

After what seemed like minutes, Maxwell came to the telephone. She was out of breath. "Yes?"

"Sandy, this is Mark. Carpenter tells me that you guys had the composite processed by L.A.P.D. and that's it's missing now."

"What? No way."

"Carpenter says that your assistant just called and said the FBI computer was down and they took it to L.A.P.D.'s Now the composite is missing."

"Oh, my dear Lord," she wailed. "No one told me our computer was down."

"Sandy?"

"Yes."

"If they know that I did another drawing, then they just might know where I am, right?"

"I'll be right over." She hung up abruptly.

Mark began to tremble, dreading this next stage of the nightmare. He walked to the front window and saw Carpenter standing next to a car, talking to another agent.

Breathing deeply to try to calm his nerves, he walked back to the couch and sat down. He felt an almost imperceptible breeze waft by his neck and turned around to look into the darkened hallway leading to the bedrooms and the dimly lit kitchen.

He got up and walked to the head of the hallway. Staring into the darkness, he turned on the light switch and felt the slight breeze again. Trying to shake off the feeling, he slowly walked down the hallway to the bathroom. He turned on the light switch and walked inside, pulling back the shower curtain and looking behind the door. "Oh, come off it," he admonished himself, walking to the commode and pulling out his cock. He waited for his urethra to relax enough to allow his bladder to empty, but he was too tense. He closed his eyes and thought of Jerry.

Hearing footsteps, he prudishly turned his back to the door, afraid that Carpenter would barge in on him. As the garrote came over his head, he glanced sideways and defensively placed his hand to his throat.

Cryder pulled tightly, sending the thin wire slicing into Mark's hand and neck. Mark futilely kicked at the intruder's crotch and flailed with his free hand, but the stronger man slammed Mark into the wall and pulled the wire tighter. Mark's face began to turn purple and his little finger was sliced to the bone.

Obviously anxious to finish and get out, Cryder released the pressure and grappled for a switchblade inside his trouser pocket. Mark's knee found Cryder's crotch, sending him to his knees in pain. Backing away, Mark tried to catch his breath, looking wildly at the door. He attempted to yell, but his voice was gone. Both men stared at each other, breathing heavily. Mark struggled to get his voice while Cryder struggled to stand up. Mark saw that Cryder's left hand was still bandaged and beginning to turn a bright red, indicating that the wound had opened.

Cryder swiftly lunged at him with the knife, but Mark kicked it out of his hand, sending it sliding into the hallway. Both men dove for the knife, but Cryder reached it first. Mark kicked at his assailant's injured left hand but missed, then jumped back, his eyes fixed on the approaching blade. He kicked at the blade again, but lost his balance, enabling Cryder to slash his thigh.

Panic-stricken, Mark backed against the hallway wall, holding his thigh in pain. As blood poured from his neck, finger and thigh, he began to feel nauseated and dizzy. He shook his head and struggled to stay conscious. Cryder's grinning image began to fade and Mark felt himself sliding down the wall, just as the knife entered his abdomen and sliced its way upward.

For the previous two hours, Jerry had felt an intense anxiety, which contributed to his consuming half a fifth of Johnny Walker Red. He fondled the hot .44 Magnum pistol he'd purchased for $400.00.

The telephone rang and Jerry answered on the first ring. "Go."

"Jerry, this is Maxwell."

From the tone of her voice, Jerry knew that something had gone terribly wrong.

"I'm in my car heading for the Anaheim Silverado Hospital," she said, almost crying. "Someone got to Mark right under our noses."

Jerry was speechless.

"He's been cut up pretty badly, but he's still alive. The paramedics got saline pumping into him right away and got him to the best hospital in Orange County. He's in surgery now."

Jerry found his voice. "Clear the way for me to see him."

"Done. He's been crying out for you."

Jerry's eyes ruptured in tears as he hung up.

The surgeon approached Maxwell and Jerry, looking warily at two pairs of FBI agents standing at opposite ends of the hallway. "Special Agent Maxwell?" He appeared tired and frustrated.

"Yes, doctor." She turned to Jerry. "And this is Mister Graham's father," she lied.

The doctor spoke to Jerry, whose face was ashen as he expected the worst. "Mark's been taken to ICU in very critical condition. After more than three hours of surgery, we managed to salvage most of his intestines and repair his stomach. There's a laceration in his liver that could cause him some serious problems. It's a miracle that the abdominal aorta wasn't cut, otherwise he'd have bled to death in seconds." He sighed. "We did all we could, Mister Graham . . . but, to tell you the truth, I . . . I don't think he'll make it. His heart arrested twice during surgery . . . and he's in a coma. I . . . I have to prepare you for that."

Jerry trembled with rage. "I want to see him."

"It's up to Agent Maxwell."

She nodded.

"I'll show you the way."

They walked into the ICU, where Jerry was immediately chilled by the strange sounds and sights of the state-of-the-art in medical technology. Oddly, it occurred to him that all of his experiences had been with the dead and not those near death or dying.

The ward was L-shaped, with the nursing station situated inside the right angle, where all patients could be observed. The unit was filled with the comatose and the heavily sedated, all clinging precariously to life. A heavy, older man lay dying across from the nursing station, his eyes bulging grotesquely as he struggled to breathe. A nurse aided a gastroenterologist as he pushed a scope tube down an unconscious woman's throat. A harried-looking nurse ran past them and grabbed a defibrillator cart, pushing it toward a bed, around which were a male doctor and two other nurses. The monitor above the man showed a flat line, accompanied by a piercing tone. The doctor leaned over the bed, injecting a huge needle into a male patient's chest. Jerry suddenly stopped and turned pale as he watched the doctor hold up the electrode pads and charge them by pressing buttons on each pad. Mark's surgeon smiled and pointed past the patient in cardiac arrest. Jerry sighed in relief, then watched as the doctor ordered everyone clear. The doctor located one pad high on the right chest and another low on the left. He pressed the buttons again, causing the patient to involuntarily jerk. As Jerry turned away, he heard the monitor begin to beep again and wished Mark the same luck.

You can feel all the essences awaiting some transcendental message to either stay or go on, he thought. *God, it's like an interface, a half way house between life and death!*

Jerry spotted a stoic-looking FBI agent sitting partially hidden behind the last bed. As Jerry reached the foot of the bed, he whispered that he wanted to be alone with Mark. Maxwell nodded at the sitting agent, who followed Maxwell and the surgeon back to the nursing station.

Jerry stared into a screen which continuously monitored Mark's EKG, pulse rate and blood pressure. Looking down at the younger man's bruised and swollen face, he felt a dark wave of rage and walked carefully to his side. He noticed the two i.v. pumps with lines running into both of Mark's arms and the drainage tubes exiting his torso and penis. He watched as the automatic sphygmomanometer pumped up and registered Mark's blood pressure reading. He imagined the horrible cuts under the bandages and how Mark's body was now struggling to try to repair the awesome damage. Fully believing that Mark wouldn't survive without some very special encouragement and inspiration, Jerry carefully bent over and whispered in his ear: "It's me, Mark. I'm here and I'll always be here from now on. You gotta pull through, Mark. You just *have* to now, so we can go back home to Texas.

Jerry straightened and looked for another sign of acknowledgment. Seeing none, he continued. "Just you and me together . . . no sharing me with some woman. I love you, Mark. Hang tough, okay? Don't leave me now. Not now." Standing, he glanced at the unchanging monitor and walked away, convinced that it was now up to Mark.

Jerry drove to Mingus' loft and saw only the new squad car parked in the lot. Assuming that the man didn't have a dog, Jerry brazenly got out the car and quietly walked around the building, studying its layout. Finally reaching the stairway leading up to Mingus' living quarters, he stopped at the first step and surveyed the surroundings. Except for the security lights across the street at the fabrication yard, all the buildings nearby were dark. The closest residential section was over six blocks away. He found it odd that Mingus would choose such a remote place to live and wondered if the warehouse downstairs from Mingus' loft had anything to do with Caiazza. He was sure it did.

He gently put his weight on the first metal stair tread and listened for creaks. Finding the stairway pretty solid, he carefully walked up to Mingus' only entrance and studied the lock. The lock inside the door handle he could manage, but there was an impregnable dead bolt above. He would just have to knock on the door and hope he could surprise the man.

Jerry pulled out the .44 Magnum and prepared to knock, lowering his hand as he remembered something Finnigan always said: *Never overlook the simplest solution.* He turned the door handle and the door opened.

The loft had been partitioned into rooms with floor to ceiling walls. Slowly and carefully, Jerry moved through a filthy, garbage-strewn kitchen with a sink filled with rancid dishes, unwashed for days. Nauseated from the stench, he moved into a dark hallway, looking inside each moonlit room for others who might be asleep. At the end of the hallway, he could see an illuminated television set in the center of a gigantic living room, which accounted for three quarters the loft area. He stood at the edge of the

room and spotted Mingus' profile. The man was sitting in an upholstered high-back chair, watching the television. Jerry wondered if he was asleep.

"Hello, Jerry," Mingus said, slowly turning his head. "I was expecting you to come barging in here to retaliate."

Jerry carefully looked around the huge room and cautiously approached Mingus, his pistol aimed at the man's head. As he got within a prudent distance, he saw a suitcase next to the chair. Mingus seemed to be dressed for a trip.

"I can give you Caiazza's head on a platter for a price. A bargain, really . . . but we can't stay here."

Jerry moved around Mingus to see what was on the other side of the chair. He was obviously unarmed.

"I'll also tell you everything, Jerry, if you promise to take me to LAX tonight. I'm flying to Mexico for medical treatment. I want to disappear." The expression in Mingus' face seemed alien, his voice, oddly sincere. "I'm dying, Jerry. I have lung cancer and heart failure, so I probably won't last too much longer. I just got the bad news from my doctors yesterday." He looked back at the television. "But I just wanted to make it right. I'm not the person you think I am." He looked up pleadingly.

Jerry sat in a nearby chair, the pistol trained on Mingus' chest. "You talk first. If I think you're lying, I'll blow your head off and go for Caiazza."

Mingus stared at the pistol. "First off, I'm no goddamn Nazi. I'm a good cop, Jerry. At least I was until this whole thing got out of hand, thanks to my greed and stupidity. You see, Full Moon and Zooloo are one in the same."

Jerry felt a tingling sensation at his temples as the shock ricocheted through his system.

"I had Full Moon solved on my own. A prostitute source . . . she called me and told me that this trick had acted wacko. She fingered him, and I started following him on a gut feeling. I broke into his apartment and found all kinds of shit." He reached for a pack of cigarettes on a nearby t.v. tray and lit one with trembling hands. He coughed up a mouthful of phlegm and swallowed it, which caused Jerry to almost throw up. "Then I found out that you and Finnigan had him on your leads list. I . . . I panicked. Instead of going to the task force with what I had, I screwed up your notes to set you off course. I needed time to build a case on my own. I didn't want you to get credit for the bust. I didn't want to share it with anyone." He stared at Jerry with a hurt look. "You've always shown me up. I've always hated you for that, and my hatred did me in. I'm a better detective than you, Jerry. I've always been better."

"Wait a minute." Jerry turned off the television and turned on a dim lamp nearby. "Go on."

"Full Moon was awaiting sentence for a separate aggravated assault conviction when he murdered those fourteen prostitutes. I caught up with him just after the thirteenth." He coughed again, wheezing as he talked. "When he went to prison, I figured I'd blown it, but I knew he wouldn't be in that long and figured he'd start up again. His name is Robert . . . P—" He coughed violently and spat up red slime into a tin can on the floor. "Parker," he finally got out. "Robert Parker."

Jerry's heart thumped with an ectopic beat as he realized how close he'd come to the killer. He broke out in a cold sweat as he realized that Full Moon/Zooloo/Parker was following him.

"After he got out of prison in just under eleven months, I was ready. I had the Full Moon evidence all neatly packaged and ready to dump inside the guy's car when the time was right. I knew he'd kill again, so I started following him . . . but the only way I could do it was to call in sick and neglect my other cases. When I realized I couldn't handle it on my own, I confided in my partner, Cryder. I knew that Cryder detested you, so I figured that the two of us could take turns and follow Parker to his next prostitute kill, then close in with some half-assed probable cause, then dump the Full Moon shit in his car." He tried to chuckle, but wheezed instead. "So one night we followed Parker into this leather bar and watched as he was picked up. Hell, we had no way of knowing that he was going to start killing *guys*. I thought he learned to fuck guys in prison but still wanted to kill women. After this revelation, all I wanted to do was follow him to the next set up and arrest him. That's when I realized how serious a mistake I'd made confiding in Cryder. He insisted on holding off and thinking of ways to manipulate the evidence against you—make you look even worse." He coughed again and shook his head forlornly. "Next thing I knew, Cryder introduced me to his sponsor, Caiazza, who promised me the world if I helped him . . . and threatened to destroy me if I didn't. He has this grandiose plan to start a goddamn war between the minorities and white people, and Cryder was his mole in your department. Then Cryder dropped the bomb that he's secretly married to Reba of all people. Sweet, untouchable Reba, a Nazi." He sighed. "Before I knew it, Caiazza was in complete control. He figured that a string of twenty or so serial gay murders would lead to riots by the gays and a backlash by the straights. He wanted to see all homosexuals, blacks, Latins and Jews—all of them—sent to concentration camps. The fucker was nuts!" He had a coughing spasm and tried to speak between coughs. "Caiazza got this idea . . . that you were . . . that you were somehow helping the FBI in this . . . investigation of him, and he got a real hard-on for you . . . and set you up." The spasm ended. "You have no idea how powerful that man is, Jerry. Powerful enough to have evidence destroyed . . . as well as people." He seemed to carefully weigh his next statement. "Then you had to go off on a tangent and think that Zooloo is a cop." He gave Jerry a taunting look, then sighed bitterly. "But it *did* lead to Cryder's downfall."

Jerry was getting impatient. "How?"

"In his zeal to get you to believe the murderer was in fact a serial killer, he stupidly tried to plant that condom in the third victim. He botched it, of course. Worse than that, while doing the condom bit, he panicked when he heard

the elevator and tried to get out of the apartment. And when the elevator stopped on that floor, he grabbed Parker's discarded wig and tried to put it on. It was Cryder that Mark saw, not the killer. "

Jerry reeled as his brain tried to rearrange all his misconceptions.

Mingus laughed and wheezed. "The funny part is that you were wrong about it all along. Parker came in his *pants*, you see. You were so caught up in his not shooting his load." He looked at Jerry's bewildered expression and laughed gleefully, then paid for it with another coughing spasm which lasted longer and produced more blood and phlegm.

While Mingus struggled to regain his voice, Jerry acknowledged his errors. A sense of embarrassment fell into the emotional soup that was his bizarre state of mind, mixing with the grief over Mark, the hatred for Caiazza and especially Cryder.

"He came in his pants," continued Mingus, "as he sewed the body parts to the face. His pants were always wet when he walked out of his victim's places. You see, he worked for the prison dentist and the good doctor taught him how to suture, having no idea how Parker would finally consummate his skills." He smiled, obviously loving the sight of Jerry's pale face. Then his own expression soured. "Had Cryder not been so fucking greedy and stupid, we'd have solved the case and you would've looked like an imbecile."

In spite of Mingus' insults, Jerry remained subdued. Somehow he knew that Mingus was telling him the truth. All the puzzle pieces seemed to fit in place.

"When the artist did the composite," continued Mingus, "we worried that you'd recognize Cryder, but you didn't even look at it. Cryder was right there looking at all the goings-on. That was a laugh." Making sure that his insult got through, he continued. "Anyway, Caiazza ordered Cryder to fuck up the composite and waste the artist. And that's when I soured on the whole scene."

"You didn't kill anyone?" asked Jerry, his voice small and raspy.

"I'm not a killer, Jerry. I never wanted to see anyone hurt over this and I've died a thousand deaths over it. But Cryder is a whole different story, I found out. He's a killing machine, much worse than Parker."

Jerry nodded, anxious to repay the "killing machine" for what he did to Mark.

"Then Parker disappeared right after you left on your vacation. He probably followed you."

Jerry felt a chill, as if he had just walked into a freezer.

Mingus grinned. "That's when Caiazza ordered us to 'solve' the case, so we went to his apartment and found that he'd left in a hurry. But he left behind the trophies and photos of you going back to the Full Moon string of killings, plus some scrawled notes in a diary. They contained descriptions of what he wanted to do to you. He might have sensed that he was being followed and thought you were close to breaking the case." Mingus coughed again. The coughs seemed to come from deeper and deeper in his chest. "After that, Caiazza decided to set up Anderson and one of his leathermen friends. He figured Kenzo and Steele were snooping for you and set them up, too. For the first time, I tried to talk him out of this craziness, but he threatened me. Said that I was in as deep as anyone else was—which is right, of course." He glanced at Jerry. "He even ordered you killed, but you slipped through the noose. I have to admit that you are good at some things." He smiled broadly. "You want to know why I'm a better detective?"

"Why?" Jerry said, amused by Mingus in some perverse way he couldn't fathom.

"Because I don't make nearly as many mistakes as you do. Your worst mistake is coming up. Are you ready for it?"

Jerry braced himself.

"When you went into Caiazza's office to say bye-bye, you said a little too much and probably got your friend killed in the process."

Jerry felt his face go slack. He wanted to cry out in anguish, but could only sit there with bitter tears of vengeance coursing down his face.

"Caiazza called his FBI contact and found out that they were hiding Graham. Cryder was sent to do him in. He apparently caught the FBI guys napping and it took no more than two minutes and he was out the door and headed back to Reba. Caiazza's fucking nuts. He's even got a contingency plan to kill Graham in the hospital in case the guy pulls through. And that will leave only one threat . . . . Me."

"I want Caiazza and Cryder, Herb," said Jerry, numb from all that Mingus had said. "Give me Caiazza and Cryder and I'll take you to the airport."

"You want to kill them, don't you?"

"Is that any surprise to you?"

"Yes, because in spite of the hatred I have for you, I know you're a good cop, like me. Killing them will prove nothing and you'd go to jail."

Jerry realized that he was right and lowered his eyes, bringing a smile to Mingus' lips. "You know I'm right. No, Jerry, what you want to do is catch them with their hands dirty."

"How?"

"In the warehouse below are tons of explosives and arms. They'll all be here in about an hour to finalize plans for a bombing of six gay bars this weekend." The frail man looked nervously at Jerry, as if he had a lot riding on Jerry's cooperation. "So? Do we have a deal?"

"What do we do?" asked a shattered Jerry.

Mingus sighed. "We wait in your car and park down the street. When they arrive and start to work, you call 9-1-1 and report shots fired with hostages. Those central guys will jump like crazy on that type of call." Mingus stood up, grabbed the suitcase and walked toward the kitchen. "And when we get to your car I'm going to tell you how to get inside Zooloo's head . . . " He turned and grinned,

wheezing in preparation for another spasm. " . . . before your luck runs out and he catches up with you." He began coughing violently, spitting on the floor as he moved forward."

Jerry took Mingus' suitcase and held the man's arm as they made their way down the stairway.

As Mingus walked by his new squad car, he touched it, as if saying good-bye, prompting Jerry to vaguely wonder why Mingus didn't just drive himself to the airport.

Jerry ushered Mingus across the street to the rental car, placing the suitcase in the front seat. "You get behind the wheel and move the car back a few blocks. I'll sit in back just to keep you honest."

Mingus chuckled and got behind the steering wheel as Jerry climbed into the back seat, his pistol trained on Mingus' head. Mingus turned the car around and drove five blocks away, near where Jerry had parked when he and Mark had watched the building before. Doing another U-turn and parking, Mingus turned off the ignition and sighed.

"Zooloo," Jerry reminded.

"Zooloo . . . yes," repeated Mingus. He stared at his building and took a deep, rattling breath. "Parker called the division right after the first killing and I took the call. Don't ask me how, but I knew it was him. Cryder was tailing him that night and verified later that Parker made a call at the exact time. He wanted to talk to you. Maybe he wanted to confirm that it was you who was following him. He could sense that someone was." He chuckled. "I told him that I was your boss and he bought it." He grinned, then became serious. "Jerry, I got into his head that night." He seemed to squirm as if the memory was coming back fresh. "He said that he was a psychiatrist and knew 'who killed the leatherman' and wanted to help Lieutenant Zeitler solve the case. He wanted to meet you privately and could I give you the message. Of course, I said I would and asked him what kind of man the killer was." Mingus glanced back at Jerry and grinned again. "Well, that opened the flood gates. He said that 'his patient' was fascinated with transmigration and spiritualism. That he believed his victims' souls were seeking him out to deliver them to a place called the . . . the *Celestial Zoo*. He mutilated and rearranged his victims to look vaguely like animals, hence the elephant, rhino, tapir and rooster. Apparently the souvenirs were taken to pray over later, to ensure that the departed souls reached the zoo on the other side. All very benevolent, don't you see. The guy thinks of himself as some savior."

Jerry was fascinated yet completely intimidated by Mingus's obvious intellectual superiority.

"So I went down to the California Institution for Men in Chino and talked to the dentist and some of the medical people there. They confirmed what I expected. Parker was raped repeatedly by the biker contingent. One doctor told me that Parker almost bled to death once, and it got so bad that just the thought of getting raped would send him cringing into a corner. They said Parker told them he was beaten and molested by his father when he was a boy." Mingus suppressed a cough and wheezed. "It's no wonder that he changed his victims to men when he got out. All passive 'bottoms', all leathermen." Mingus slowly turned his head and smiled at what he saw: Jerry, completely demoralized.

Less than an hour later, five cars slowly approached the building from the opposite direction and parked in the lot. Jerry spotted Caiazza, Cryder and Reba through the binoculars. While Cryder walked up the stairway to the loft, Caiazza opened an overhead rolling door below. As everyone disappeared inside, the door closed.

Jerry watched as Cryder pulled out a pistol and walked inside Mingus' kitchen. "Cryder just went in to take care of you, amigo."

"Okay, let's get to a phone booth," said Mingus, starting the car and turning into the opposite direction. As they neared the end of the block, Mingus reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a small, black box with a red button and telescope antenna. He pulled out the antenna.

"Oh, my God," mumbled Jerry.

Mingus slammed on the brakes and turned to Jerry, his eyes bulging with excitement. "Surprise!" He pressed the red button as Jerry slipped down into the seat, still pointing the pistol at Mingus.

The initial explosion from the warehouse beneath the loft was small, followed by a massive, deafening blast which showered Jerry and Mingus with shattered glass from the back window. The surrounding neighborhood became lit up like noontime as flames roared upwards hundreds of feet. Secondary explosions made the car sway like it was in an earthquake.

Jerry and Mingus slowly got out of the car and looked at the inferno.

"They'll think I was there, Jerry," Mingus yelled over the roar of the inferno. "My car, my house, everything I own. All that heat and no evidence." He smiled. "Now I can go off and die with dignity."

As the heat became intense, Jerry pushed Mingus into the car and drove, trance-like, to the airport.

SEVENTEEN

The Following Afternoon

Jerry had waited throughout the night and the following morning in the waiting area outside the ICU. He was filthy, and his hair was slightly singed, giving him an odd, repulsive odor. In spite of his appearance, he had gained the compassion and respect of the nurses in the ICU; they regularly came out and reported that Mark was still holding on. Mark's doctor even allowed Jerry inside to maintain his whispered encouragement. The FBI guards were still present and rather zealous in light of the previous screw-up.

That morning, other families keeping their own vigils joined Jerry, and someone turned on the television set. Jerry watched indifferently as the the local stations de-

voted hours to the mysterious explosion and fire that destroyed over twelve industrial buildings. But the story began to change near mid-morning when firemen began to piece things together. News personnel began to report that a homicide lieutenant had secretly lived above the site of the explosion and that several policemen were missing. Later the news hit the street that Deputy Chief Caiazza, allegedly being probed by the FBI, was likewise missing. By early afternoon, one reporter announced that police were now theorizing that the house was a bomb factory for a neo-Nazi death squad, most of them policemen.

The FBI personnel began to quietly leave the hospital.

The reporting frenzy that ensued prompted Jerry to flee from the television set to find a quiet window from which to look out over the metropolitan area he would soon be leaving, one way or another. It was a day filled with sunshine and soft breezes, and the smog was moderate.

"Jerry?"

He turned to find Santoro and Finnigan, who had just stepped out of the elevator. "Hey, look who's here!" Jerry smiled warmly at his old friends.

Both looked at him in horror and slowly approached him.

"Thought you were on vacation," Jerry said to Finnigan.

"I heard what was happening and had to come back."

Santoro began to cry and placed her arms around Jerry.

"Hey, Santo, I'm pretty gamey right now," he protested weakly, then reciprocated.

Finnigan joined them and Jerry placed an arm around him, too.

"We let you down, Jer," said Finnigan, his voice almost cracking with emotion. "We let you down."

"No you didn't," Jerry said softly. "You were right all along."

Both Santoro and Finnigan held him at arm's length, confused.

"Zooloo isn't a cop after all. Caiazza's little death squad was involved, but not like you think.

Finnigan and Santoro looked at each other, confused.

"Finn," began Jerry. "Maybe we'd better go and sit down. You got a note pad to take a statement?"

Finnigan nodded and they followed Jerry to a quiet waiting area with several chairs.

Jerry told Finnigan and Santoro all he knew about Parker, but never divulged his source. He never mentioned Mingus's name. He was determined to allow Mingus a dignified death in Mexico.

After all the notes had been taken and questions asked, both Finnigan and Santoro reluctantly got into the elevator, looking back at Jerry with overwhelmed expressions.

When the doors began to close, Jerry said, "You'll be heros! One of you's gonna be a goddamned lieutenant!"

As the detectives disappeared, Jerry's expression turned grim. He walked to the window overlooking the parking lot, searching for the blue Plymouth Duster that wasn't there.

A page came over an intercom for a Mr. Graham to check in at the ICU.

Jerry's face turned pale as he ran to the ICU entrance. Reaching the security doors, Jerry pushed a buzzer and a familiar nurse opened the double door for him.

"What's wrong?" Jerry was terrified.

"Now settle down," she said, smiling. "He's okay. He's asking for you." She walked with him toward Mark's bed.

Jerry studied her expression to make sure he'd heard her correctly. "He's talking?"

"Yes." She placed a finger in front of her lips. "Not so loud, Jerry."

"He's out of the coma?" he whispered roughly.

She nodded, then stopped.

Jerry looked toward Mark's bed and saw another nurse talking to him. He rushed to the bed and looked down at Mark, who smiled back at him.

Mark held out his hand and Jerry held on to it. "They tell me I'll make it."

"That's great, son," Jerry muttered, holding back the tears of relief.

"I had a dream," Mark began weakly. "You were hovering over me and you promised we'd go to Texas and . . . and live . . ." He appeared tired and sleepy.

Go ahead and tell him. You won't live long enough to stand behind it. "That wasn't a dream, Mark. I made a very big promise to you." He thought of the promise and felt trapped. "I want you to sleep now, okay? I want you to get well fast, because we're going to Texas soon." Jerry was anxious to draw Full Moon/Incubus/Parker out into the open and get the whole nightmare over with once and for all. "Okay?"

Mark smiled and closed his eyes.

Jerry cooked yet another t.v. dinner and ate it while looking through the yellow pages for movers. He wrote down the numbers of four companies and planned to call them the following morning. The .44 Magnum was lying on the table, just in case. The motion sensor he'd bought for Cliff House was also on the table, to be activated when he decided to try to get some sleep.

The telephone rang and he answered it, anxious that perhaps Mark's condition had taken a bad turn. It was Finnigan.

"Well, we got everyone alerted. We should find him soon."

"So what do you do next?"

Finnigan laughed. "You know, that sounds weird. I'm so used to your barking orders to me that I think I'm talking to someone else. You're actually *asking me* what I plan to do next."

"That Jerry Zeitler doesn't exist any more, Finn." Jerry took a bite from his dinner and pushed it away. "So what

do you do next?"

"Well, I've already contacted Morton, who anointed me acting top dick and head of the task force, which is about to close in on Mister Parker. We have an APB out, complete with real photos."

"You'll get him, Finn." Jerry felt very tired.

"I'm concerned about Parker's obsession with you, Jerry."

"Yeah, I suppose I am, too."

"Well, I've got people outside the ICU, just in case Parker goes for Mark to draw you out."

"He won't."

"And I got a squad car outside your apartment."

Jerry grinned. "Thanks."

"Thank *you*. Otherwise we'd never know." Finnigan paused. "Jerry, did you not tell us about Parker earlier because you wanted to take him out?"

Jerry didn't know how to answer. It never occurred to him. "Maybe."

"Don't, Jerry. Let us handle it. You concentrate on moving to Texas with Mark and keep yourself in one piece."

Jerry was embarrassed. "How did you find out about me and Mark?"

"Maxwell and Santoro got together and figured it out. Nosey bitches." There was a pause. "I'm shocked, Jerry, but not disappointed. I love you like my own brother. Maybe I love you a little more, now that I know you're human . . . and fallible."

"Thanks."

"I . . . I never would have figured, Jerry. It makes me want to go back to the drawing boards with my ideas about sexual preference."

"Well, it's not as cut-and-dried as you might think, Finn," said Jerry easily, amazed that he was so comfortable with the subject. "Say you and some guy were stranded together on an island hundreds of miles from civilization and you figured you'd be there for awhile. What would you do?"

Finnigan laughed nervously. "Probably fuck his brains out."

"Well, Finn, I was on that island with Mark. I never felt so alone in my life . . . but he was there, Finn. He was there for me."

There was a long moment of silence, then Finnigan softly said, "Get some rest."

"That I'll do."

"And Jerry. Scrub off that singed hair, will you?"

Jerry slowly hung up and stared at the telephone as the import of Finnigan's last remark filtered into his brain.

Jerry programmed the black, cube-shaped motion detector and left it on top of the dining room table, where it would be effective against entry from the door, the living room windows and the small window in the kitchen. He turned up the alarm as loud as it would go.

He thought of having a brandy to help him sleep, but decided that he needed to be alert. He turned off all the lights, then climbed into bed, at once feeling how badly his body needed rest. A short time later, he was fast asleep.

Just before three in the morning, Jerry was awakened by a scratching noise in the kitchen. He cocked his head and listened as the scratching escalated into a grating sound, as if rats had gained entrance to the space between the walls and were trying to gnaw their way through the insulation and wall panels. He quickly got out of bed and walked into the living room, setting off the alarm. Turning it off, he stood and listened in the dark room. The noise was coming from his and Rhoda's common dining room wall.

He walked to the location of the noise and held his ear to the wall. He could hear the sound of an object probing from Rhoda's side; Jerry visualized a large knife. He heard the whirring sound of a small motor and realized that someone was cutting the wall with something like a drill. *No, not a drill,* he thought. *More like . . . an electric meat carver?* Suddenly, the whole wall began to vibrate as the machine attacked the wall with a vengeance.

He ran into the bedroom and got into his robe and slippers. Grabbing his pistol, he rushed out of his apartment and scanned the terrace and stairway. Quietly closing his door, he edged toward Rhoda's entrance and saw that the door was partially open. The hair on his neck seemed to crackle as a chill drifted over him in anticipation of what he expected to find. Even at the apartment entrance, Jerry could already smell the overpowering odor of ether.

Slipping inside Rhoda's apartment, he scrutinized the dimly lit living room, dining area and kitchen and saw that there were no shadows or other places in which to hide. He inched toward the dining area and saw an electric meat carver on the floor, near a pile of gouged-out wall material. He looked for a trail of blood but found none. Calming himself with deep breaths, he crept into the hallway to the bedroom with the pistol extended out in front with two hands. Preparing himself for a scene of horror, he turned on the light in the bedroom and was dumbfounded at the sight of a neatly made-up bed. Glancing at the bedroom window, he saw that a screen had been torn off and a drape panel dislodged. The window was wide open.

Searching all the closets and every conceivable place for someone to hide, he walked back into the dining area and looked down at the meat carver. Then he noticed a torn-out page from a magazine pinned to the wall above the hole. It was a photograph of an elk and there was a handwritten caption underneath the animal. It said: "ZIETLER." Oddly, the misspelling of his name irritated him until he realized the full import of the message. *I'm next. He wants to transform me into an elk.* As he contemplated just which appendages would suffice for antlers, a nauseating sourness emerged from his stomach.

A man abruptly walked through the front door and Jerry knelt, preparing to fire.

"Don't shoot!" A familiar voice shouted. "It's me, Don, the super."

Jerry's hands shook as he lowered the pistol. "Jesus, Don, you almost got your head blown off." Jerry sat on the floor, trying to control his trembling.

"What's going on?" the tall, blond superintendent asked, inspecting the damage to the wall while staring warily at the pistol.

"I don't know." Jerry slowly got to his feet. "I heard the noise and thought Rhoda was in trouble."

"Yeah, the neighbors downstairs called me up and complained." He scratched his head. "Rhoda told me she was going to be in Seattle this week visiting her sister, so I was about to knock on your door to see what *you* were up to."

Jerry stared at the wall and realized that Parker could have set a trap for him. "Don?"

The super looked at him.

"Go to the street and you'll see two men sitting in a car. They're cops. Walk toward them with your hands up so they don't shoot you, okay?"

The frightened man frowned.

"Ask them to come here, will you?"

"What?"

"Just do it!" snapped Jerry. "This is serious police business, okay?"

The young man hurriedly left the apartment and rushed down the stairway.

Jerry walked around to his apartment entrance and looked down at the doorknob like it was a piece of white-hot steel, fresh out of a blast furnace. He gently turned the knob and the door opened. *Oh, fuck, I left it unlocked!* He carefully peered around the door and studied the living room, dining area and kitchen. Entering cautiously, he left the door open and stood contemplating the darkness of his bedroom hallway.

"Come out, Zooloo," he sang eerily, as if someone else had taken over his body. His own voice sounded alien. "Come out and make me an elk, Zooloo. *Let's play.*" His skin tingling and seemingly undulating, he brazenly strode to the bedroom and flicked on the light, scanning the room with his powerful pistol, wishing that Parker had made the mistake of waiting for him there.

He opened a door to a small hallway closet and inspected it, narrowing down Zooloo's hiding place to just one: a walk-in bedroom closet. He crept toward the closet and noticed that the door was ajar and the light was on. Then he smelled the awful odor of ether. He rushed to the closet and threw the door open, his pistol cocked and aimed for the center of the room. "You motherfucker!" Seeing no one, he dropped to his chest and pointed the pistol under his bed, finding no one there either.

Jerry easily sat on the bed and stared at his trembling hands. Eventually his eyes focused upon the inside of the closet and he noticed an ether-soaked wash cloth on the floor.

EIGHTEEN

The Next Morning

Finnigan studied him over a steaming cup of coffee.

"Why don't you go to the office now, Finn?" asked Jerry, irritable over his sleep deprivation. "What more do you need?"

"Why didn't you call me before you went inside her apartment? Huh?" Finnigan narrowed his eyes. "Jerry, did you get a piece or do you think you're immune to a switchblade?"

Jerry ignored the question and pulled out the list of movers from the telephone directory.

"You want some breakfast?" asked Finnigan, yawning. "I'll buy you breakfast at Bakers Square down the street. How about it?"

"Maybe later. I have to get a couple of estimates on the move, then I have to contact a friend of Mark's." Jerry yawned, too.

"Jerry? Don't go after him."

Jerry rolled up his eyes. "How would I do that, Finn? I don't know where he is."

"Don't try to set a trap, because it could get some of us killed. We know he's obsessed with you and we're watching every move you make. Just let us handle it, okay?"

Jerry looked impatiently at the mover list.

"Jerry?"

"Okay, Finn," Jerry answered, his head beginning to throb.

Finnigan got up and walked to the doorway. He turned around. "Get some sleep this afternoon."

Jerry nodded, then stood up to see Finnigan out.

Finnigan's eyes seemed moist and he looked away. "I care about you, Jer. Don't do this again."

Without thinking, Jerry placed his arms around Finnigan and hugged him. Feeling the flexing of Finnigan's immense biceps, he realized that he'd been hugged in return, then backed away, his eyes brimming with moisture.

Finnigan turned and walked out of the apartment and down the stairway. Jerry watched as the big man wiped his eyes just before disappearing behind a huge jade tree.

When Jerry reached the hospital, the nurses in the ICU gleefully told him that Mark had been moved to a private room in a different wing. Elated, Jerry rushed to the room and found Mark laughing at something Paxton had said.

Paxton spotted Jerry first and gave him an indignant look. "You! I had to read about him in the papers. How inconsiderate can you be?"

Jerry was sincerely apologetic. "I'm sorry. I was about to call you."

"Oh, shut up, Pax," Mark said weakly, smiling at Jerry. "Hey, big guy."

Jerry walked to the side of the bed. He wanted to squeeze Mark's arm, but felt intimidated by Paxton's

presence. "Hey, partner, feeling better? God, you sure *look* better."

"Uhh," began Paxton. "I think I'll leave now. Have to get to work." He glanced at Jerry and smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" he said to Mark.

"See you, Pax," said Mark. "Thanks for coming by."

Paxton gave Jerry a look of obvious disapproval, then left, almost running into one of two plain clothes detectives pacing about the hallway.

"You don't look like you're getting any sleep," observed Mark.

Jerry sat in the chair Paxton had occupied. "I'm getting a little. After they catch Parker, I'll probably get more."

"You had another close call." Mark looked at him gravely.

"No, I didn't," lied Jerry.

"I can see it in your eyes. Last night . . . was it last night?"

Jerry gestured toward the one visible detective outside the room. "They follow me like bloodhounds, Mark. How can I be in trouble?"

"They might be obvious here, but I'll bet they're invisible on the outside. They want you to lure Zooloo, don't they?"

Jerry was amazed at how perceptive Mark was. *Of course, Finnigan wants me to lure Zooloo, and it wouldn't work unless Zooloo thought that I* **wasn't** *that well protected. And in light of the events of last night, Zooloo should be convinced that I* **am** *vulnerable. Although he'd deny it, Finnigan wants me to have the pistol because he knows that he can't protect me and lure Zooloo at the same time.* "They think they know where he is, Mark. It's just a matter of time before they close in," Jerry lied again.

Mark shook his head and looked away.

"You're worried over nothing." Jerry smiled. "Hey, I got mover estimators coming to your apartment today and mine tomorrow. If the price is right, I'll let them pack it all up and move it out."

Mark nodded, then tried to smile.

"I'm having it all consolidated and placed in storage in Austin." The reality of what Jerry was saying made him nervous. It was as if he was talking about someone else.

Mark sensed the strain in Jerry's voice.

"When you get discharged, we're headed out for *Texsis*," Jerry said with a twang, trying to loosen up. "No lookin' back. We'll start using words like 'y'all' and 'hot damn.'"

"Is this what you really want?" asked Mark, studying Jerry carefully.

Jerry tried to look Mark in the eye, but he could only manage a quick glance. "I promised, didn't I?"

Mark shook his head slowly. "Hey, big guy . . . you made the promise to keep me alive. And it worked. But . . ."

"Hey, don't read more into this, Mark." Jerry felt irritated and anxious. "I have Parker on my mind, I haven't slept . . . and a couple more unbelievable things happened that I'll tell you about when we get out of here." He struggled to chuckle. "I sort of feel like I'm coming unglued here."

But Mark somehow knew that, among all the other things, the promise was gnawing at Jerry. "I've been thinking about nothing but this, so I'll have to say it." He shuddered. "I won't hold you to it."

"What?" Jerry was becoming impatient with him.

"From here on out, we do what we feel in our hearts, not what we feel obligated to do." Mark sensed that he had finally reached Jerry. "You *will* get out of this okay. They'll catch Zooloo; things will get back to normal. And you'll find that life won't be so impossible any more. Perhaps you won't need me then." Mark smiled wanly. "That's what it was all about, wasn't it? You and I were alone together in the universe, and we were all the other had. Even if we did hit the road for Texas, maybe some special woman would come into your life . . . ." He sighed deeply. "And you'd have to pursue it . . . in spite of the promise."

Jerry stared at him and felt his stomach squirming in agony. "A promise is a promise, Mark. It has to do with a man's honor."

"But, Jerry, it's no good if everyone's miserable. What you're talking about is like how the Catholics think about marriage. A promise is made that can't be broken. People suffer, Jerry. They grow to hate one another and they drink heavily . . . and then they get sick and die, for God's sake."

The telephone rang, startling Jerry.

"Someone's been trying to get in touch with you. I think it's Finnigan," said Mark, nodding at the telephone.

"Didn't he leave a message?" Jerry answered the telephone. "Hello."

There was a rustling sound and a sigh.

"Hello?"

A giggle.

"Who is this?" Jerry frantically waved for the attention of one of the detectives.

"Is this the fat ex-lieutenant?" It was the voice of a young man, but it had a unique timbre. Something about the voice made Jerry cringe.

"Yes."

One of the detectives saw Jerry's frantic waving and ran down the hallway, muttering into a hand-held radio.

"Have you ever heard an elk scream?" The voice had an edge Jerry could only describe as *mad*.

"Hello, Parker," Jerry said easily. "You should have stayed around last night. We could have gotten to know each other better."

"Elks scream like women, fat man."

"Why do you hate me so much, Parker?" asked Jerry, trying to keep Parker on the line as long as possible.

"Hate?" He giggled again. "Exterminating angels don't hate, old fat man. Your spirit called me and now I'm here for you. I'm here to get you across as an elk."

Jerry had no idea what to say next. It was like he had

fallen into a frightening hallucination. "An elk? How will you do that? Where do you mean by 'across?'" Jerry let himself go, allowing himself to float with his instincts. "Do you take me across, or do you send me?"

"Oh, I can't go with you, Lieutenant. It's a different plane, you know. I can only send you and pray that you end up in the right place. But they always end up in the right place. They're all there waiting for you."

"When will you send me?"

"Soon now . . . soon."

Jerry laughed abruptly. "You're a fraud, Parker. You are *not* an exterminating angel."

"I AM, TOO!" Parker shrieked, bringing sharp pain to Jerry's ear.

"No you aren't." Jerry was concerned that his eerie conversation would adversely affect Mark. He placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Your rhinoceros was a mistake. It should have been a unicorn."

"Not fictional animals, you idiot! They've got to be real! The Celestial Zoo only takes . . . ."

"Parker?"

"You're trying to trap me," the young man murmured.

Jerry heard a click and a dial tone, then hung up.

"When does it end?" asked Mark forlornly. "It just goes on and on."

Jerry sat in the chair and stared at Mark. "It's almost over."

"How do you know?"

Jerry leaned back in the chair and knew that he could fall asleep . . . and probably should. "Because I just got into his head," Jerry said, nodding. Slowly, he got up and walked to the door, staring at the hallway wall. "I have to get some sleep." He glanced back, winked and left.

Mark closed his eyes and wished that he'd not survived.

NINETEEN

Later That Morning

Jerry sat at his dining table, staring at a bottle of Scotch and a glass before him. He glanced at the telephone answering machine nearby and watched the blinking red light. He felt an odd sense of relief over Mark's absolution, but the guilt was tearing him up inside. The night of the promise, he'd known that it was something Mark had to hear. But when Mark improved and it became obvious that he would live, Jerry found himself hoping that Mark wouldn't remember the promise.

He pressed the play button and two spine-tingling messages from Zooloo played. Both revealed in detail how he planned to transform Jerry into an elk.

As he was about to pour the Scotch, a message from Lydia Armani played: "I'm back from Europe, Jerry, and I find my freezer empty and cum-stained robes all over the goddamned house. I want you to come over here immediately and tell me all the gory details. You obviously must have got your little vacuum toy, and I insist upon seeing that, too."

There was yet another message from Zooloo and one by Finnigan, then the tape went silent.

Jerry walked into his bathroom and looked at himself in the full length mirror. He'd lost weight. Rummaging through his closet, he found a pair of white jeans and tried them on without underwear. Finding a bottle of Lagerfeld cologne in his medicine cabinet, he splashed a small amount on his neck. Dressing in a T-shirt and sneakers, he looked at himself in the mirror again and realized that he had to find out just what he was.

As Jerry drove to Cliff House, he developed a sense of foreboding. He felt edgy and searched for the blue Duster in his rear view mirror.

Reaching Lydia's house, he saw that her red Mercedes convertible was in the driveway, being washed by the gardener. Admitting himself with his card key, he parked his car and greeted the gardener, who pointed at Lydia lying in a chaise longue on the terrace.

As he walked toward the terrace, he could see that she was nude and lying on a huge towel. He stood at the top step of the short stairway to the deck and gazed at her heaving, perfectly formed breasts. His groin tingled as he stepped onto the redwood deck.

She awakened with a start.

"Well, look who's back," said Jerry, sitting in a chair opposite her.

"The jet lag is killing me," she said, sitting up and trying to cover herself with the towel. A very well preserved fifty-three and stunningly beautiful, she was the product of four cosmetic surgeries, plenty of exercise and a low fat diet. "You look different."

"It's been sort of wild the last few days." He rubbed his hand through his short hair and patted his belly. "I'm probably a little greyer and a little lighter."

"Lighter, yes." She inspected his hair. "I believe you *are* greyer. But there's something different still." She yawned. "I'll think of it."

"Sorry I left the place in such a mess."

"I did have to send out for pizza, thanks to your eating everything in sight. Your date must eat like a horse—that or you threw a party." She chuckled.

"No party. Uhh . . . I'll be glad to wash the robes."

She laughed and wrapped the towel around her, then stood at the railing, shielding her eyes from the sun. "Do you have any idea what kind of stain semen leaves on white silk?"

Jerry's face flushed. "I'll buy you new ones."

Lydia sat in his lap. "Come, tell Aunt Lydia all about her." She studied his face, then jumped up. "That's what's different about you. You're in love!" She looked him up and down. "My God, you're wearing tight jeans instead of those awful baggy trousers." She sniffed. "Good God, you're wearing cologne!"

Blocking out her words, he stood up. He stared at her ample breasts and reached out for her.

"Jerry?"

He brought her close and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"My God, what did she do to you?" She laughed nervously. "What happened to all this 'let's just be friends' shit?"

Jerry reached for her hand and held it against his erection.

Her mouth fell open and Jerry filled it with his tongue. Dramatically he swept her off her feet and carried her into the living room.

Pulling the towel from her, he lay it down on the carpeting, then placed her gently upon the towel. He opened her blouse and licked her nipples while massaging her clitoris. Within seconds, she was moist and dilated and grappled for his cock. He pushed her hand away and deftly guided it inside her.

He fucked her roughly as they rolled over the carpet. Wild-eyed, she dug her nails into his back and hissed like a jaguar. He manipulated her into one position after another, as if they were filming for a marital aid video. Eventually, she cried out in orgasm, and he willed himself to join her. Near climax, he saw that Lydia was glassy-eyed and shamelessly licking the air. Somehow, the absurdity of her face took the edge off his surge, and he struggled to find a surrogate in the form of a fantasy. Instead of a fantasy figure, there appeared the image of a huge monitor lizard, its forked tongue flicking wildly. Jerry's eyes burned from the gas of digesting carrion emanating from the beast's stomach.

He could feel his cock shrinking and considered faking a climax, but he found the act distasteful and shamefully dishonest.

As they lay exhausted on the floor, Jerry sensed an overpowering feeling of guilt. "Oh, shit," he said, trying to shrug it off. "I'd forgotten how good you were."

She looked at him in awe. "But, Jerry, you were *never* that good." She smiled and closed her eyes. "I simply must meet her. She'll never know about this, rest assured."

Jerry realized that Lydia was oblivious to his lack of climax. He began to dress.

"Not yet, Jerry," she pleaded. "You'll spoil the afterglow!"

He stood at the sliding glass doors and stared out over the basin. "It's not a she."

She sat up. "What did you say?"

He turned and glanced at her, wondering why he felt compelled to tell her. "It's a he."

Her face became ashen. "You want to run that by me again, Jerry?"

"I said it's a HE. A man."

"Jerry, tell me this is some joke."

"No."

"But, Jerry . . . what have you done to me?" Her voice was quavering in anger.

"I didn't come, Lydia, so don't get your nose out of joint. It went limp as a wash rag, darlin'. Besides, he's negative and I know goddamned well that I am, too." He buried his face in his hands. "If anything, you should be pissed at me for *using* you to try and prove something."

"Proving what?"

"That I'm not as queer as a three dollar bill."

Lydia absently knelt and picked up the towel, modestly wrapping it around her. He started for the stairway, then turned and looked at Jerry with disgust. "I have to take a long shower." she slowly climbed the stairway. "Would you excuse me?"

A streak of the sun's reflection passed by his eyes, instinctively prompting him to move away quickly. There was the sound of glass shattering, followed by the crack of a rifle. "Get upstairs and call the police!" he yelled at Lydia, then scrambled for the kitchen door.

As he rushed to his car and his pistol hidden underneath the front seat, he heard the sound of a car motor starting. Looking up, he watched as a blue Duster tore down the hill from outside the gate.

He gave chase in his car, only to have to wait patiently as the heavy gate opened and allowed him to pass through. Screeching through the entrance, he drove down to the first hairpin curve and almost lost control of the car. And then he found himself behind two slow moving cars. The chase was over.

Jerry pulled into scenic overlook and ran to the edge, looking down at the road below. He watched as the blue car wielded the final curve and disappeared. He walked to his car and leaned against it. He felt like a complete fool. In his quest for retrieving his manhood, he'd forgotten to watch out for Zooloo. He'd blown the best chance ever to trap the killer. *All because I thought I had something to prove. Stud heterosexual sombitch! Goddamn, I sure know how to fuck them women!*

And then he realized that there had been no L.A.P.D. tail on him. Someone had blown an assignment with near tragic results.

Making sure he wasn't being followed, Jerry turned in his rental car and picked up another. By the time he'd reached Parker's old apartment building, it was twilight. He pulled into a parking space behind a truck and staked out apartment 201.

Almost two hours later, the blue Duster slowly drove by, which prompted Jerry to slip down in the seat. After driving by twice, Parker parked over a block away and walked toward the apartment building.

Parker appeared to be highly agitated and looked nervously up and down the street. As he reached the building, he walked a few feet past, prompting Jerry to slip further down and out of view. Finally, Parker turned and walked to the apartment office, where he rapped once on the door. The door opened and he quickly walked inside.

Making sure his pistol clip was full of hollow point bullets, Jerry slipped out of the car and strode purposely and fearlessly toward the office entrance. Just a few feet away, he saw that the door's security chain had been engaged and the door left slightly ajar. He carefully walked around to a window and peeked through an

opening between two drape panels.

The young man with the ponytail handed Parker a small plastic bag filled with a white, powdery substance. Parker reciprocated with a handful of twenty-dollar bills. Both men stood leaning over a table in the center of the room, just a few feet from the doorway.

Do it, Jerry urged himself. *Time to find out what the fuck's goin' on.* Jerry moved back to the entrance door and knocked the door open with his foot. "Freeze!" yelled Jerry, his pistol aimed at Parker's head.

Parker swiftly pushed the other man into Jerry and ran through the back of the apartment. Jerry went after Parker, but the other man hung on to him, slowing his progress. By the time Jerry had broken free of the young man and reached a patio door in the back, he could see Parker turning a corner several yards away. As Jerry reached the street, Parker had reached his car and driven off in the opposite direction.

Infuriated, Jerry returned to the apartment office and found the young man in the bathroom, flushing a substance down the commode. Grabbing the man by his ponytail, Jerry tripped him, sending him crashing to his knees at the base of the commode. Jerry violently pushed the man's face into the toilet water, flushing the commode again, counting slowly to twenty-five.

As he lifted the man's gasping face from the bowl, he asked firmly, "Tell me where he's staying."

The man screamed, prompting Jerry to push his face down again, pressing his knee into the man's back for support. This time, he slowly counted to thirty-five, then lifted the man up again.

"Okay, okay!" The man coughed up water, then vomited.

Jerry winced and flushed the commode again. "Talk, or I'll send you down for the last time."

"His name is Parker."

"I know that," growled Jerry, pressing his head down again.

"I don't know where he lives now, man, honest!" The young man glanced terrified at Jerry. "I just sell him drugs, man. I'm amazed he came back here after all the cops and all. But the fucker's fearless, man. He's saturated with PCP and strung out on ice all the time, man. You cops'll need ten men to drag him down if you can ever catch him."

Jerry let go of the man and turned to leave the apartment.

"You cops'll never get him."

"I'm not a cop," said Jerry. "I'm going to kill him, not arrest him."

TWENTY

The Following Week

Jerry stared at the inch of Scotch left in the liter bottle, then glanced at the blinking light on his answering machine. Knowing that the movers wouldn't take the Scotch, he poured it over a glass of ice and sipped it. Horrified as he realized that it was just after nine in the morning, he pushed the glass away.

He heard the sound of a truck and walked to the kitchen window, which afforded a view of the parking area in back. Instead of the movers, who had promised to arrive before nine, it turned out to be the garbage truck. As huge mechanical arms lifted a heavy dumpster and emptied it into the truck, Jerry heard remnants of familiar music and wondered if it was coming from the truck.

The telephone rang, making Jerry tense. He hoped that it wouldn't be Mark again. Like water seeping through an earthen berm, the image of Mark came into his mind, tightening his stomach in guilt.

His recorded voice invited the caller to leave a message at the sound of the tone. The tone sounded.

A falsetto voice said, "I seeeeeeee you."

There was a click, followed by a dial tone.

Jerry heard the music again and realized that it was coming from Rhoda's apartment. Suddenly it stopped. He wondered why Rhoda wasn't working that day.

The telephone rang again and Jerry approached the glass of Scotch. Downing the whiskey in one gulp, he picked up the receiver. "Hello," he muttered tersely.

There was a brief period of silence, then there was a heavy sigh. "They miss you at the hospital, fat man."

Jerry gripped the receiver. "Well, if it isn't the bad old serial killer. Hey, how come you haven't killed anyone lately? Lost your nerve, Parker? Did you run out of PCP and ice?"

Parker chuckled. "I'm saving my strength for you, fat man, my magnificent elk."

"You're going to need quite a bit of strength to take me, you cocksucker," growled Jerry.

"We're here at the hospital waiting for you, fat man," continued Parker. "Mark is very depressed."

How would he know that? Jerry hung up and dialed the nursing station for Mark's ward. A nurse answered and he asked to speak to one of the detectives.

A short time later, a man answered. "Detective Fernandez."

"Fernandez, this is Jerry Zeitler." Acute pain inflamed his stomach.

"Yeah, Lieutenant, what do you need?"

"Parker could be in the hospital."

The detective laughed. "No way, Lieutenant. He'd have to be disguised as a ninety-year-old woman in a wheelchair, and even *that* wouldn't get him past us."

"He just called me and told me shit that he could only find out there."

"Jerry, the only people to see Mark are this guy Paxton, the nurses and the doctors. That's it."

Jerry reached for a bottle of Gaviscon and threw two tablets into his mouth. "Well, keep alert, okay?"

The detective chuckled, gently reminding Jerry that he wasn't the boss any more. "Okay, Jerry. Will do."

Jerry hung up and stared at his trembling hands. *Jesus, what's happening to me?* He chewed the antacid tablets, which gave him some relief.

He heard the music again and walked out on his front terrace, glancing back at Rhoda's door. He struggled to remember where he'd heard the music, but drew a blank. Then came the distinct sound of a large truck and he rushed to the kitchen window to see that the van had arrived.

The telephone rang again and he fiercely grabbed the receiver. "You motherfucker!"

"Jerry?" It was Mark.

Jerry sat down and shuddered. "Sorry. He's been calling again."

"Why haven't you returned my calls?" Mark's voice sounded small and distraught. "I've been worried sick."

"I'm sorry."

There was a short period of silence as neither man could speak.

Mark broke the silence. "Paxton says that some young guy came on to him in the cafeteria. I think it was Parker."

"How do you know?"

"The description. You stopped coming here and he got rattled, probably," Mark surmised.

"So that's how he knows you're depressed. Paxton told him, huh?"

"I guess."

"Are you?" Jerry's stomach felt as if it had a hot brick inside it.

"What?"

"Depressed."

Mark chuckled bitterly. "What do you think? You're drifting away and I'm helpless to stop you."

Jerry's throat felt dry and his eyes began to burn. "I'm not drifting away . . ."

"Then what else would you call it?"

Jerry tried to find the word.

"What, Jerry?"

"I'm . . . disintegrating."

The moving van driver appeared in the doorway. "Are you the guy who's moving to Texas today?" he bellowed.

Jerry quickly placed his hand over the receiver, but it was too late. "Mark?"

After a moment of silence, the line was gently disconnected.

Jerry watched as the movers took the last two boxes out of his bedroom and headed down the stairs with them. He walked to the bedroom window and looked down at the moving van. Furniture and boxes were strewn about, awaiting placement inside one of the large modular containers inside the van. Hearing a movement from the living room behind him, Jerry whirled around, his hand reaching for the pistol inside his belt.

"Jerry?" yelled Don, the complex superintendent.

"Yeah!" shouted Jerry, joining the young man in the nearly bare living room.

"Almost finished, huh?" Don looked around the apartment.

"Looking for damage you can deduct from my security deposit?" asked Jerry, half-seriously.

"Of course not," the super said, continuing his inspection of the kitchen. "New tenant. I have to get the place ready and shampoo the carpeting by next week."

"Male or female?"

Don smiled. "Female, and a fox, too."

Jerry chuckled. "Oh, I'm sure Rhoda will be thrilled about that."

The super stared at the carpeting. "Shit, I might have to replace the carpeting. I forgot how old it is." He looked up at Jerry. "Have you seen her yet?"

"The new tenant?"

"No, Rhoda." Don went through the kitchen, opening all the drawers and looking inside the refrigerator.

"No, why?" Jerry looked around for a place to sit, finally choosing the floor.

"She's got the flu. Looks like hell and her voice is like a frog's." Don grinned. "She told me to tell you that she's got a going away gift for you. Guess she's too sick to come over."

"Yeah, she wants to give me a dose of the flu to remember her by," mumbled Jerry, leaning against the wall.

"Hey, can I ask you a personal question?" asked Don, a sly smile forming.

"No, I never fucked her," blurted Jerry.

Don appeared flustered. "I think I'm too skinny and young for her. Boy, does she have the hots for you, though."

Jerry rolled up his eyes.

"I think I'll see how she's doing," Don said, walking around to Rhoda's door. He knocked.

"Yes?" A faint, frog-like voice.

"It's Don. You need anything?"

"Did you tell Jerry?"

"Yes, ma'am." Don looked at Jerry and shrugged.

Jerry nodded.

"He'll be right over." Don grinned and walked down the stairs.

Jerry slowly got up and walked back to the window in the bedroom. He saw that the movers were on a break, so he decided to get the farewell with Rhoda over with.

He knocked on Rhoda's door. "Rhoda, it's me, Jerry."

"Come in. It's unlocked." A hacking cough.

Jerry pushed the door open and found the apartment dark and oppressive. It reeked of vapor ointment . . . and *what else?* He saw a shock of red hair against a white pillow on the living room couch. Rhoda appeared to be wrapped in a blanket.

"I hear you don't feel too well," said Jerry, warily approaching her, determined not to catch the flu. "I just want to tell you that you've been a good neighbor and I wish you all the luck in the . . ." He stopped as he saw Rhoda's bulging, blood-shot eyes and realized that she was vigorously shaking her head in warning. Then he saw that her mouth was taped.

The door slammed shut and Jerry spun around, reaching for his pistol. He felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder, followed by a sharper pain across his right hand. Dropping his pistol to the floor, he rolled toward the kitchen, knocking over a dining room chair. His back pressed against the wall, he inched toward the kitchen cabinets and scanned the darkness of the living room. Hearing no footsteps, he took stock of his wounds and realized that he'd been stabbed just below his clavicle and slashed across his right hand. He lightly touched his shoulder wound to determine if his subclavian artery or vein had been severed, but he could detect no spurting blood. Feeling a warm, oozing stickiness, he therefore compressed his right hand with his left armpit and pressed his left shoulder wound with his left hand, hoping to stop the bleeding. Clear-headed and strangely relieved that the duel had finally begun, he prepared to defend himself with his feet.

A dim lamp came on near the door and Jerry looked in awe at a male figure, totally adorned in black leather.

The man stood in the dim light and stared at him through slits in a black hood. He slowly turned and pressed a button on a tape player, then continued his oppressive gaze upon Jerry. To the sound of Jean-Michel Jarre's "Zoolook," he fondled a hunting knife with Jerry's blood on it. "You called," Parker murmured through a small opening in the hood. "I'm here."

Rhoda tried to scream into the tape covering her mouth and flailed about wildly.

"If you don't behave, I'll send you along with this elk," ordered Parker, pointing at Jerry.

The music began; Jerry absurdly envisioned Mark standing in the opposite corner, lecturing on Jarre's unique music.

Electronic elephants trumpeting . . . an electronic choir . . . minor key, menacing.

Parker took off his black gloves and dropped them to the floor, as if stripping to the music.

Human voices, fragments of speech, Swahili here, Arabic there. Mandarin, even. Fragments.

Parker unbuttoned his leather jacket and dropped it atop the gloves as Jerry stood gaping, immobile.

More elephants, crying. "Day shun . . . day shun . . . tschut, tschut . . . tschut, tschut, tschit."

Parker took off his boots . . .

"Uvs me, Uvs me . . . eve mee jawwwwwww."

. . . and trousers.

Two men . . . deep, resonant voices, converse stereophonically. "Eh tee ah mau . . . ehtee ah mau."

"Hwana, hwana . . . hwana eh teh."

Parker stood nude, wearing only the hood.

"Jesus Christ," mumbled Jerry. The room had become a cocoon of madness, insulated by light years of space.

"Who?" asked Parker, approaching Jerry with the knife outstretched. He stopped out of reach of Jerry's powerful legs. "I'm sorry I wounded you, Mister Elk. I was aiming for your throat to make it painless and quick."

A bass note, barely perceptible to the human ear. Birds screeching, mammals (tapirs?) squalling.

Do something, Jerry. Do something, you goddamned idiot!

Parker studied Jerry as a butcher would a side of beef. "Yes, you'll make a wonderful elk." He abruptly turned and walked to the coffee table, upon which lay suturing equipment, a bottle of ether and a hacksaw. "Come closer, please."

Say something, Jerry!

Parker walked to a stereo and turned the music up.

A change of beat. Animal grunts . . . like a scene in "King Solomon's Mines" . . . ebony giants jumping high . . . graceful. Bells jangling.

Jerry dumbly realized that Parker had been playing the tape all morning, and he became furious at himself for not recognizing it. *You're right, Mingus, I'm not a good detective.*

Parker glanced back at Jerry. "I said come closer." His voice was menacing and tinged with a promise of violence.

Jerry remained coiled, hoping that Parker would lose his composure and charge.

"Okay, then I slit her throat." He rushed toward Rhoda.

Hearing Rhoda's muffled wails, Jerry got to his feet and moved toward the pistol on the floor.

Jerry saw that Parker had the knife to Rhoda's throat.

Parker moved away from Rhoda. He circled around Jerry, then changed directions and circled around him again. "Do you feel helpless without your big, bad pistol, Mister Elk?" Parker pushed the pistol toward the apartment entrance with his bare foot and inched closer to Jerry.

Jerry was suddenly unafraid. He could no longer hear the music because he was concentrating so intensely. It was as if a voice had come to him and urged him to talk to the monster. *Talk to him. Blow his mind, Jerry.* "You got screwed a lot in prison, didn't you, Parker?"

Parker cocked his head like an inquisitive dog. He took off the hood, exposing hate-filled eyes and a grim expression.

"I saw your rhino, Zooloo. . . "

"Don't call me Zooloo. I *hate* that name. It sounds so . . . African."

"Whatever. Your rhino looked very amateurish," Jerry continued in a raspy whisper. "So did your rooster. Did you like getting fucked in prison? Did they call you their little pussy and make you suck them off?"

Parker opened his mouth in a growing leer. His drug-dilated eyes became even more inflamed with rage. "No!" he yelled, lunging with the knife.

Jerry pulled back and smiled, knowing that he had found Parker's soft under-belly. "I'm gonna fuck you, Parker, just like your *daddy* did." Jerry unzipped his fly and pulled out his cock, stroking it in spite of the fact that his hand felt on fire.

"No! Put that back!" Parker lunged again, less convincingly. His eyes betrayed fear for the first time.

As if his life depended upon it, Jerry's penis half-filled

with blood and thickened somewhat. He had the feeling that he had entered Parker's mind—that he had penetrated the man's defenses and was lunging back with a mental knife of his own. "Watch me get hard, little pussy," growled Jerry, inching toward Parker, intimidating him. Jerry glanced at Rhoda, who appeared to have fainted. "Watch me get hard and fuck your little pussy ass like your daddy did. Did your daddy fuck you when you were little?" Then it occurred to Jerry that his "knife" was perhaps even deadlier than Parker's. The killer's eyes betrayed horrible memories of the heinous acts of own father. A fleeting nuance of vulnerability passed through the young man's eyes, and Jerry felt terribly guilty.

Tears rolled down Parker's face, and he moaned softly.

Don't feel sorry for him! No guilt now. NO GUILT! Keep on, relentless, relentless. Save your ass! "The big bikers in prison. Did they fuck you, too?"

Parker's face screwed up and he turned his head away from Jerry. "No, no, no, no, no!" he began to lament.

"Turn around, little pussy. You know there's no way out. Like all the other times, you just have to lie there and take it. Turn around!" shouted Jerry, inching toward his pistol.

Someone began beating on the door. "Open up! Police!"

"NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!" Parker bellowed, spinning in circles, the knife slashing in every direction.

"Police! Open the door or we'll . . . "

"Move out of the way!" Boomed a familiar voice Jerry recognized as Finnigan's.

"Don't touch me!" yelled Parker, his eyes fully dilated. "DON'T TOUCH ME!" He began slashing the wall, a lamp, a chair.

A heavy metal object pounded at the door, shaking the entire apartment.

Jerry picked up an end table and retreated toward Rhoda.

Parker rushed toward him and stabbed the table again and again, sending splintered wood all over the living room. Just as the table was about to disintegrate, Parker turned and slashed at some invisible tormentor. *His father?* He ran into the wall full force, flattening his nose and cutting his forehead. Blood covered his face. "No, Daddy. No! Please, no!"

The door crashed off its hinges and landed at Parker's feet.

Jerry first saw several gun barrels, then the pairs of unbelieving eyes.

"Drop the knife," Finnigan ordered, moving slowly through the doorway, his pistol aimed at Parker's chest. "Jerry? Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Jerry coughed, realizing that he was getting weak from blood loss. He looked down and noticed that his bleeding had increased and that his cock was still hanging out. As he stuffed his penis back inside his trousers, his vision began to blur and colors faded, causing him to drop to his hands and knees.

"Drop the knife, Zooloo, or I'll blow your fucking head off," menaced Finnigan.

With a stentorian roar, Parker evolved into the monster created by his own father, fueled by the mixture of PCP and methamphetamine. He rushed Finnigan, forcing him to jump out of the way. As he ran toward Santoro's outstretched .357 Magnum pistol, there was a deafening boom and the sudden formation of a pink cloud of tissue and blood.

Jerry closed his eyes as some of the tepid mist clung to his face.

He awakened a short time later as paramedics were squeezing saline solution into his veins to stabilize his blood pressure. Finnigan looked down at him with concern. That's when he realized that he'd lost much more blood than he had thought. He glanced at the couch and saw that two more paramedics were treating Rhoda, who had suffered bruises about her face. She appeared to be catatonic. Parker lay face up in the doorway, a neat hole appearing like the ash smear of a good Catholic on Ash Wednesday.

As the paramedics lifted Jerry and his gurney over the corpse of Parker, Finnigan, Santoro and Anderson rushed to aid in carrying him down to the ambulance.

"Hey, you bums," greeted Jerry weakly.

Santoro searched the eyes of the nearest paramedic.

"He'll make it," the young woman said. "He lost a lot of blood, but his blood pressure's more stable now."

As he was being placed inside the ambulance, Jerry looked back and saw that all three of the detectives had tears in their eyes. Drawing from the same bizarre instincts he'd used on Parker, he lay back and sang, "Don't cry for me, L.A.P.D. The truth is, I never left you." He looked up again and saw that Finnigan and Santoro had turned away laughing, shaking their heads.

Anderson remained. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

The paramedics closed the doors, and the wailing ambulance drove away.

TWENTY-ONE

Fredericksburg, Texas . . . Thirty-two days later.

Jerry stared at himself in the Texaco washroom mirror as he slowly washed his hands. He lost his focus and fell into a vision of rolling green hills near San Marcos, Texas. He saw a ranch-style brick house and a Plymouth Voyager van in the driveway. He smiled at himself, knowing that it wasn't a dream any more. It was almost a reality, and it was just about eighty miles away. Drying his hands, he rushed out to his new Plymouth Voyager van, now with a full tank of gas. He got behind the wheel and started the motor, then drove out of the service station and toward the highway.

A block away, he did a U-turn and came back to the service station, laughing at the look on Mark's face as he stood in front of the mini-mart with two soft drinks and two

sandwiches. Jerry opened the passenger side door and took first the soft drinks, then the sandwiches from Mark's hands.

"That wasn't funny," Mark said, getting into the van.

Jerry drove out of the station and headed toward the main highway in earnest. "Yes it was."

Mark rolled his eyes. "How long to Austin?"

Jerry looked at his watch. "Well, if the highway patrol don't get us, I reckon about an hour and a half."

"'I reckon?'"

"Hail yes!" Jerry grinned. "Let it out, son. Let dat Texsis accent jes slide out of ya mouth!"

Mark caught the spirit and started to sing: "The stars at night . . . forgot the words . . . " He hit the dash three times as Jerry sounded the car horn in unison.

"Deep in the heart of Texas," they both sang, terribly out of key.

Thunderstorms which had been to the southeast of them were now before them. The lightning was relentless and awesome. As they drove into the storm, it became darker, and Jerry turned on the headlights. Light rain began to fall on the windshield.

"I think we'd better revise our ETA," said Jerry.

"We're headed right for it, looks like."

"If it gets really bad, maybe we'd better pull off on to one of these farm roads and wait it out." Jerry said, smiling broadly.

"What do you have up your sleeve, Big Daddy?" Mark licked his lips.

"A promise I made to myself."

Mark frowned. "A promise?"

"It's crazy as hell, but I still made it to myself. And you know about me and promises."

Mark rolled up his eyes. "Well, are you going to tell me?"

"No."

Mark stared at him, a confused grin on his face. He shrugged.

The storm became fierce, and Jerry had the wipers on the fastest setting. "There it is."

"What?" Mark was nervous about traveling through such a terrible storm.

"The Blanco County line. That's between longitude ninety-eight and ninety-nine and, according to that astrology shit you got in West Hollywood, that represents a special zone for me. Something about a place where there's a desire for extreme or exotic forms of satisfaction." Jerry grinned. "A place where you can set your soul free . . . or something to that effect. This here's President Johnson country." Jerry left the highway and pulled over to the narrow shoulder of a farm road. He killed the engine, and the windows immediately began to fog up. "I promised myself I'd suck your cock the second we crossed the Blanco County line."

"You *what?*" Mark laughed, passing the statement off as just more of Jerry's pranks.

"Take it out, Mark. I don't want to have to think this out any more than I have already."

Mark realized that he was serious. "No, Jerry. Now's not the time. Try it during the heat of passion sometime. Take one little step at a time."

"Unzip your goddamn pants, Mark," growled Jerry.

"Jerry, no," pleaded Mark. "There's so much to lose. I don't want another Tony, like in Chicago."

"Fuck Tony in Chicago. This is Jerry, deep in the heart of Texas." He roughly unbuckled Mark's belt and unzipped his jeans, jerking them down his thighs. He slid Mark's shorts down also and contemplated the growing cock.

"Just go down on it and get it out of your system. Then I'll take you," suggested Mark.

Jerry stared at the penis as if it were a cup filled with some exotic, mysterious potion. He closed his eyes and took it inside his mouth, holding it there. His mouth was dry and his tongue avoided touching the shaft.

"Okay, that's enough," whispered Mark.

But the saliva secreted, and Jerry's tongue gently touched Mark's shaft. It laved upward, meeting a rivulet of Mark's precum. He tasted the aperitif and found it palatable.

"Okay, Jerry." Mark gently pushed at Jerry's face.

"Back off and let me do what I have to do, goddamnit," Jerry murmured between strokes.

"Oh, Baby, I can't hold it back," Mark said with urgency. "I'm gonna cum, Jerry."

"Uhhhhh," Jerry responded, sucking ineptly, wildly.

Mark tried to pull away, terrified that his semen would so totally revolt Jerry that their relationship would be ruined. He opened the door and was pelted by a mixture of driving rain and traces of hail. Trying to step out of the car, he stumbled and fell backwards onto the ground, astonished that Jerry was still clamped on him. A crackling, streaking bolt of lightning struck a live oak tree less than a mile away, and Mark experienced the most dynamic climax of his life. Unable to see because of the torrent, he reached for Jerry's face and neck, which registered a careful swallow.

Jerry lifted Mark to his feet and held him in the rain, kissing him, offering him the semen residue. "Promise fulfilled," Jerry shouted over the roar of the rain. Then he pushed Mark down to his crotch and unzipped his own trousers, offering his frenzied, primed cock to Mark's mouth.

Another streak of lightning arced down from the sky and soared back upward, striking nothing, impregnating the entire area with dancing, static electricity.

Jerry erupted and leaned back against the car. He quaked violently as the throbbing offered ecstasy, then he soared to grand heights of rapture.

He howled in celebration at the rain.

THE END

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PROFILES OF COVER MODELS

FRONT COVER - **J.D. BEHR**, a retired educator and distinguished playwright and poet, is currently involved iin the trucking and renovation industry in San Francisco, where he lives with his mate, CR model, HANDLEBAR.

INSIDE FRONT COVER - **JOEL** is one of the best things to happen to CR in a long time. This extraordinarily handsome and sexy 28-year-old has begun providing us with some of the most dazzling photography we've ever seen by an amateur photographer. He's brough us 7 new models in less than a month! He wants to become one of the best photographers in the business and we think he'll make it. He's an ardent lover of older men and makes his home in Idaho.

INSIDE BACK COVER - **J.J. TWO** (aka J.J. TEN!) is semi-retired from the travel industry and lives in San Francisco. He's quiet, yet outgoing . . . and all man. He enjoys the company of mature, hairy men. The photograph in this special issue is dedicated to all the readers who wrote in, demanding to see what J.J.'s cock looked like with foreskin. Photographer **CHELSEA WILLIAMS** is quite simply among the world's finest erotic photographers, or couldn't you guess? If any of our Bay Area readers would like to be photographed by this lens wizard, please contact us and we'll get you in touch with him.

OUTSIDE BACK COVER - **GENTLE BEN**, a 66-year-old, 6'-5", 250 pound Libran, lives on the Gulf Coast of Florida with his 32-year-old partner of 8 years.

IN CLOSING

We want to thank all our readers who purchased this special issue. By doing so, you have helped us increase our cash flow so that we can keep our labor of love going. Some magazines survive on commercial advertising. We survive on the sale of special issues. For those of you who might have just joined us and can't figure out why we don't include the special issue in the regular subscription price, we have the following explanations:

1. If we included the special issues in our subscription format and offered 8 issues per year, our subscription price would have to be well over $50; our cover price would be near $6.50 per issue--just to break even. Very few subscribers and almost no bookstores or distributors would touch us for that. Even our present rates are considered high by those who cannot grasp the commercial ad and the "older man stigma" factors.

2. Roughly half of our customers are interested in reading full-length novels, so why include it in the regular package? Those fans who don't mind paying extra for the novel (and some of our more provocative material) know that they would have to pay the same or much more for an equally entertaining novel on a book store shelf. About half of our subscribers buy the special issues. The others don't. Several hundred non-subscribers buy the special issues, but aren't interested in our regular issues.

We haven't decided upon the next novel, which should appear in the special issue scheduled for next spring. The novel will be called PRING and is the story of a young New York Eurasian who is drawn into the underworld of organized crime because of his love for an older gangster. The novel spans the drug-frenzied sixties through the present and follows PRING's transition from a gentle, naive victim to psychiatric patient to vengeful killer as he searches for his missing lover. The novel was originally written in 1971, re-written in 1978 and will evolve into its final form after next winter.

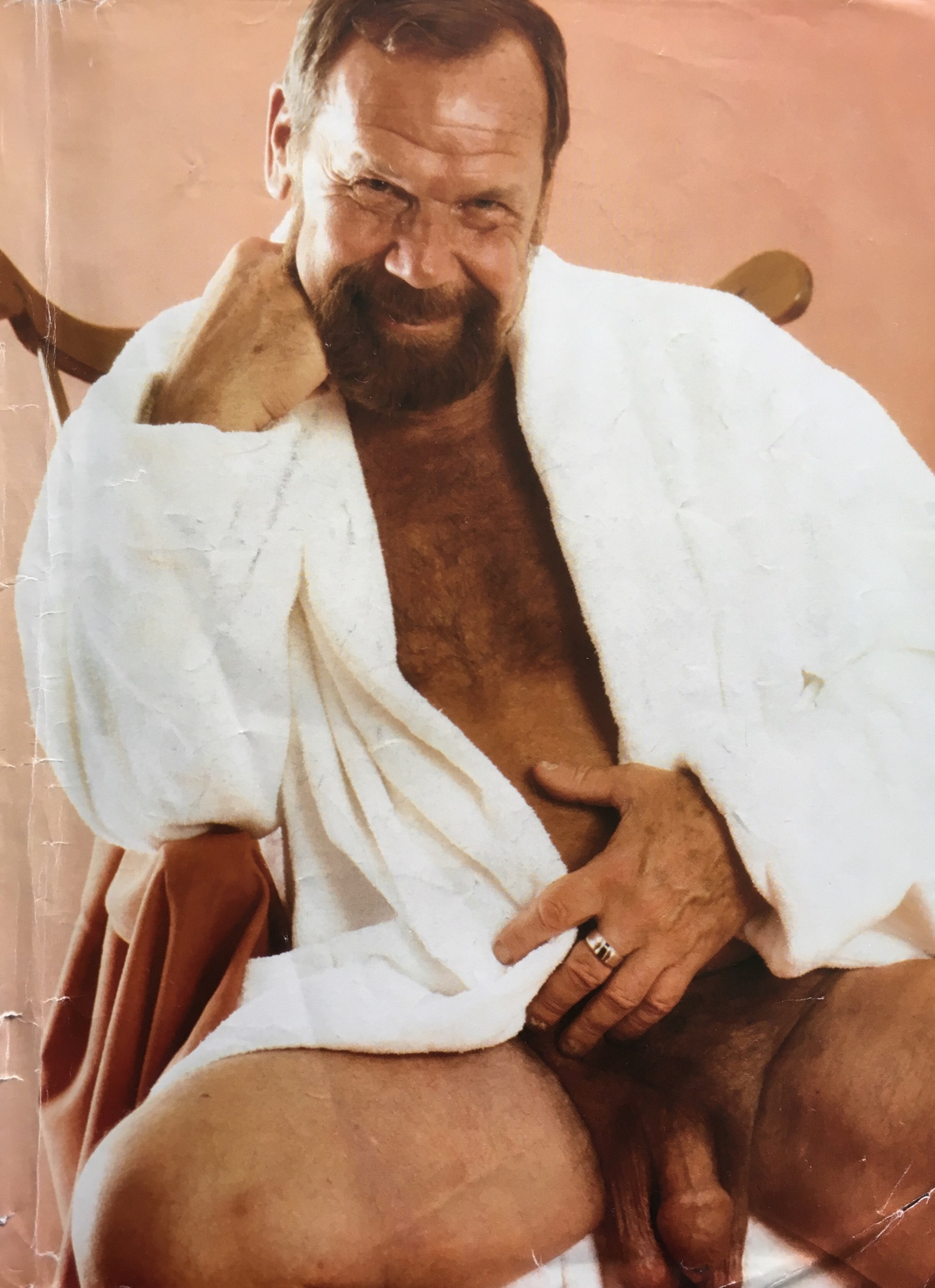
. . . OR . . .

The novel will be called THE CRAZING OF BYRON SWEET, based on a play written in 1984. CRAZING will probably remind readers of a homoerotic ROMANCING THE STONE because some of the action takes place in Venezuela/Colombia and it's a love story. But that's where the similarity ends. Basically, CRAZING is about a burned-out, older ventriloquist whose only "friends" are two dummies . . . until a handsome young DEA agent comes along with a wild story about a fortune in emeralds and how he's running from both the DEA and the Colombian drug lords.

Have we got the stories to tell. No writer's block in this wacked-out brain. Stick around and you'll eventually read them all.

Happy Holidays to you all.

Pat and The Friar

BILL JUNIOR'S BUTT

BILL JR. is one of our favorite people in all the world. This burly, ex-pro football player visited us a couple of years ago and we really became attached to him. So we figured that we'd publish the photo he's asked about a couple of times (he was probably convinced that we would never publish it because it might look gross to some). On the contrary, we think it looks pretty great and decided to end this opus with--what else?--a great-looking rear end.